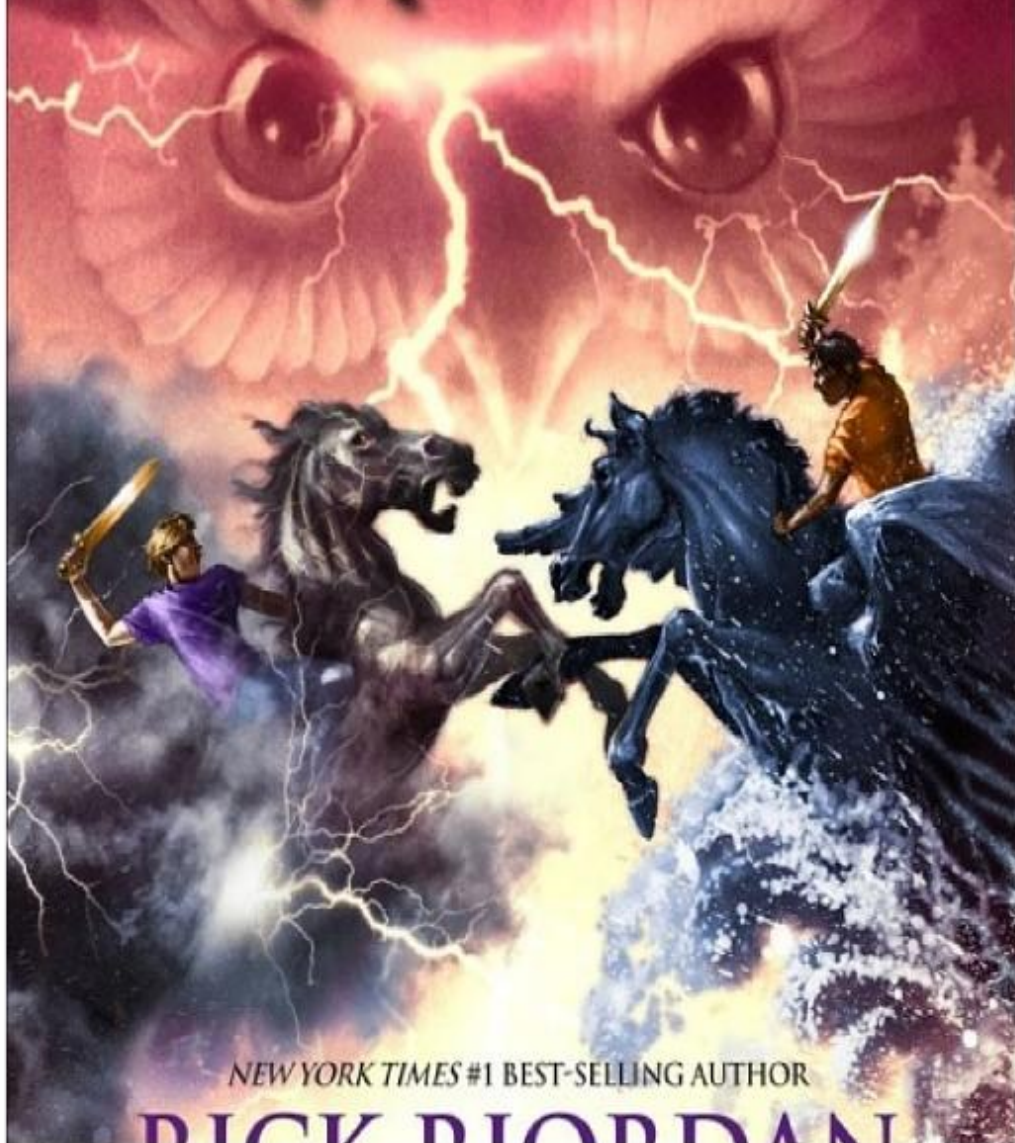


THE HEROES



OF OLYMPUS

THE MARK OF ATHENA



NEW YORK TIMES #1 BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

RICK RIORDAN

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To Speedy
Strays and wanderers are often sent by the gods.

THE MARK OF ATHENA

ANNABETH

UNTIL SHE MET THE EXPLODING STATUE, Annabeth thought she was prepared for anything.

She'd paced the deck of their flying warship, the *Argo II*, checking and double-checking the ballistae to make sure they were locked down. She confirmed that the white "We come in peace" flag was flying from the mast. She reviewed the plan with the rest of the crew—and the backup plan, and the backup plan for the backup plan.

Most important, she pulled aside their war-crazed chaperone, Coach Gleeson Hedge, and encouraged him to take the morning off in his cabin and watch reruns of mixed martial arts championships. The last thing they needed as they flew a magical Greek trireme into a potentially hostile Roman camp was a middle-aged satyr in gym clothes waving a club and yelling "Die!"

Everything seemed to be in order. Even that

mysterious chill she'd been feeling since the ship launched had dissipated, at least for now.

The warship descended through the clouds, but Annabeth couldn't stop second-guessing herself. What if this was a bad idea? What if the Romans panicked and attacked them on sight?

The *Argo II* definitely did not look friendly. Two hundred feet long, with a bronze-plated hull, mounted repeating crossbows fore and aft, a flaming metal dragon for a figurehead, and two rotating ballistae amidships that could fire explosive bolts powerful enough to blast through concrete...well, it wasn't the most appropriate ride for a meet-and-greet with the neighbors.

Annabeth had tried to give the Romans a heads-up. She'd asked Leo to send one of his special inventions—a holographic scroll—to alert their friends inside the camp. Hopefully the message had gotten through. Leo had wanted to paint a giant message on the bottom of the hull—*WASSUP?* with a smiley face—but Annabeth vetoed the idea. She wasn't sure the Romans had a sense of humor.

Too late to turn back now.

The clouds broke around their hull, revealing the gold-and-green carpet of the Oakland Hills below them. Annabeth gripped one of the bronze shields that lined the starboard rail.

Her three crewmates took their places.

On the stern quarterdeck, Leo rushed around like a madman, checking his gauges and wrestling levers. Most helmsmen would've been satisfied with a pilot's wheel or a tiller. Leo had also installed a keyboard, monitor, aviation controls from a Learjet, a dubstep soundboard, and motion-control sensors from a Nintendo Wii. He could turn the ship by pulling on the throttle, fire weapons by sampling an album, or raise sails by shaking his Wii controllers really fast. Even by demigod standards, Leo was seriously ADHD.

Piper paced back and forth between the mainmast and the ballistae, practicing her lines.

"Lower your weapons," she murmured. "We just want to talk."

Her charmspeak was so powerful, the words flowed over Annabeth, filling her with the desire to drop her dagger and have a nice long chat.

For a child of Aphrodite, Piper tried hard to play down her beauty. Today she was dressed in tattered jeans, worn-out sneakers, and a white tank top with pink Hello Kitty designs. (Maybe as a joke, though Annabeth could never be sure with Piper.) Her choppy brown hair was braided down the right side with an eagle's feather.

Then there was Piper's boyfriend—Jason. He stood at the bow on the raised crossbow platform, where the

Romans could easily spot him. His knuckles were white on the hilt of his golden sword. Otherwise he looked calm for a guy who was making himself a target. Over his jeans and orange Camp Half-Blood T-shirt, he'd donned a toga and a purple cloak—symbols of his old rank as praetor. With his wind-ruffled blond hair and his icy blue eyes, he looked ruggedly handsome and in control—just like a son of Jupiter should. He'd grown up at Camp Jupiter, so hopefully his familiar face would make the Romans hesitant to blow the ship out of the sky.

Annabeth tried to hide it, but she still didn't completely trust the guy. He acted too perfect—always following the rules, always doing the honorable thing. He even *looked* too perfect. In the back of her mind, she had a nagging thought: What if this is a trick and he betrays us? What if we sail into Camp Jupiter, and he says, *Hey, Romans! Check out these prisoners and this cool ship I brought you!*

Annabeth doubted that would happen. Still, she couldn't look at him without getting a bitter taste in her mouth. He'd been part of Hera's forced "exchange program" to introduce the two camps. Her Most Annoying Majesty, Queen of Olympus, had convinced the other gods that their two sets of children—Roman and Greek—had to combine forces to save the world from the evil goddess Gaea, who was awakening from

the earth, and her horrible children the giants.

Without warning, Hera had plucked up Percy Jackson, Annabeth's boyfriend, wiped his memory, and sent him to the Roman camp. In exchange, the Greeks had gotten Jason. None of that was Jason's fault; but every time Annabeth saw him, she remembered how much she missed Percy.

Percy...who was somewhere below them right now.

Oh, gods. Panic welled up inside her. She forced it down. She couldn't afford to get overwhelmed.

I'm a child of Athena, she told herself. *I have to stick to my plan and not get distracted.*

She felt it again—that familiar shiver, as if a psychotic snowman had crept up behind her and was breathing down her neck. She turned, but no one was there.

Must be her nerves. Even in a world of gods and monsters, Annabeth couldn't believe a new warship would be haunted. The *Argo II* was well protected. The Celestial bronze shields along the rail were enchanted to ward off monsters, and their onboard satyr, Coach Hedge, would have sniffed out any intruders.

Annabeth wished she could pray to her mother for guidance, but that wasn't possible now. Not after last month, when she'd had that horrible encounter with her mom and gotten the worst present of her life....

The cold pressed closer. She thought she heard a faint voice in the wind, laughing. Every muscle in her body tensed. Something was about to go terribly wrong.

She almost ordered Leo to reverse course. Then, in the valley below, horns sounded. The Romans had spotted them.

Annabeth thought she knew what to expect. Jason had described Camp Jupiter to her in great detail. Still, she had trouble believing her eyes. Ringed by the Oakland Hills, the valley was at least twice the size of Camp Half-Blood. A small river snaked around one side and curled toward the center like a capital letter *G*, emptying into a sparkling blue lake.

Directly below the ship, nestled at the edge of the lake, the city of New Rome gleamed in the sunlight. She recognized landmarks Jason had told her about—the hippodrome, the coliseum, the temples and parks, the neighborhood of Seven Hills with its winding streets, colorful villas, and flowering gardens.

She saw evidence of the Romans' recent battle with an army of monsters. The dome was cracked open on a building she guessed was the Senate House. The forum's broad plaza was pitted with craters. Some fountains and statues were in ruins.

Dozens of kids in togas were streaming out of the Senate House to get a better view of the *Argo II*. More

Romans emerged from the shops and cafés, gawking and pointing as the ship descended.

About half a mile to the west, where the horns were blowing, a Roman fort stood on a hill. It looked just like the illustrations Annabeth had seen in military history books—with a defensive trench lined with spikes, high walls, and watchtowers armed with scorpion ballistae. Inside, perfect rows of white barracks lined the main road—the Via Principalis.

A column of demigods emerged from the gates, their armor and spears glinting as they hurried toward the city. In the midst of their ranks was an actual war elephant.

Annabeth wanted to land the *Argo II* before those troops arrived, but the ground was still several hundred feet below. She scanned the crowd, hoping to catch a glimpse of Percy.

Then something behind her went *BOOM!*

The explosion almost knocked her overboard. She whirled and found herself eye to eye with an angry statue.

“Unacceptable!” he shrieked.

Apparently he had exploded into existence, right there on the deck. Sulfurous yellow smoke rolled off his shoulders. Cinders popped around his curly hair. From the waist down, he was nothing but a square

marble pedestal. From the waist up, he was a muscular human figure in a carved toga.

“I will *not* have weapons inside the Pomerian Line!” he announced in a fussy teacher voice. “I *certainly* will not have Greeks!”

Jason shot Annabeth a look that said, *I’ve got this*.

“Terminus,” he said. “It’s me. Jason Grace.”

“Oh, I remember *you*, Jason!” Terminus grumbled. “I thought you had better sense than to consort with the enemies of Rome!”

“But they’re not enemies—”

“That’s right,” Piper jumped in. “We just want to talk. If we could—”

“Ha!” snapped the statue. “Don’t try that charmspeak on *me*, young lady. And put down that dagger before I slap it out of your hands!”

Piper glanced at her bronze dagger, which she’d apparently forgotten she was holding. “Um... okay. But how would you slap it? You don’t have any arms.”

“Impertinence!” There was a sharp *POP* and a flash of yellow. Piper yelped and dropped the dagger, which was now smoking and sparking.

“Lucky for you I’ve just been through a battle,” Terminus announced. “If I were at full strength, I would’ve blasted this flying monstrosity out of the sky already!”

“Hold up.” Leo stepped forward, wagging his Wii

controller. “Did you just call my ship a monstrosity? I *know* you didn’t do that.”

The idea that Leo might attack the statue with his gaming device was enough to snap Annabeth out of her shock.

“Let’s all calm down.” She raised her hands to show she had no weapons. “I take it you’re Terminus, the god of boundaries. Jason told me you protect the city of New Rome, right? I’m Annabeth Chase, daughter of—”

“Oh, I know who *you* are!” The statue glared at her with its blank white eyes. “A child of *Athena*, Minerva’s Greek form. Scandalous! You Greeks have no sense of decency. We Romans know the proper place for *that* goddess.”

Annabeth clenched her jaw. This statue wasn’t making it easy to be diplomatic. “What exactly do you mean, *that* goddess? And what’s so scandalous about —”

“Right!” Jason interrupted. “Anyway, Terminus, we’re here on a mission of peace. We’d love permission to land so we can—”

“Impossible!” the god squeaked. “Lay down your weapons and surrender! Leave my city immediately!”

“Which is it?” Leo asked. “Surrender, or leave?”

“Both!” Terminus said. “Surrender, then leave. I am slapping your face for asking such a stupid

question, you ridiculous boy! Do you feel that?"

"Wow." Leo studied Terminus with professional interest. "You're wound up pretty tight. You got any gears in there that need loosening? I could take a look."

He exchanged the Wii controller for a screwdriver from his magic tool belt and tapped the statue's pedestal.

"Stop that!" Terminus insisted. Another small explosion made Leo drop his screwdriver. "Weapons are *not* allowed on Roman soil inside the Pomerian Line."

"The what?" Piper asked.

"City limits," Jason translated.

"And this entire ship is a weapon!" Terminus said. "You *cannot* land!"

Down in the valley, the legion reinforcements were halfway to the city. The crowd in the forum was over a hundred strong now. Annabeth scanned the faces and... oh, gods. She saw him. He was walking toward the ship with his arms around two other kids like they were best buddies—a stout boy with a black buzz cut, and a girl wearing a Roman cavalry helmet. Percy looked so at ease, so happy. He wore a purple cape just like Jason's—the mark of a praetor.

Annabeth's heart did a gymnastics routine.

"Leo, stop the ship," she ordered.

"What?"

“You heard me. Keep us right where we are.”

Leo pulled out his controller and yanked it upward. All ninety oars froze in place. The ship stopped sinking.

“Terminus,” Annabeth said, “there’s no rule against hovering *over* New Rome, is there?”

The statue frowned. “Well, no...”

“We can keep the ship aloft,” Annabeth said. “We’ll use a rope ladder to reach the forum. That way, the ship won’t be on Roman soil. Not technically.”

The statue seemed to ponder this. Annabeth wondered if he was scratching his chin with imaginary hands.

“I like technicalities,” he admitted. “Still...”

“All our weapons will stay aboard the ship,” Annabeth promised. “I assume the Romans—even those reinforcements marching toward us—will also have to honor your rules inside the Pomerian Line if you tell them to?”

“Of course!” Terminus said. “Do I look like I tolerate rule breakers?”

“Uh, Annabeth...” Leo said. “You sure this is a good idea?”

She closed her fists to keep them from shaking. That cold feeling was still there. It floated just behind her, and now that Terminus was no longer shouting and causing explosions, she thought she could hear the presence laughing, as if it was delighted by the bad

choices she was making.

But Percy was down there...he was so close. She *had* to reach him.

“It’ll be fine,” she said. “No one will be armed. We can talk in peace. Terminus will make sure each side obeys the rules.” She looked at the marble statue. “Do we have an agreement?”

Terminus sniffed. “I suppose. For now. You may climb down your ladder to New Rome, daughter of Athena. *Please* try not to destroy my town.”

ANNABETH

A SEA OF HASTILY ASSEMBLED demigods parted for Annabeth as she walked through the forum. Some looked tense, some nervous. Some were bandaged from their recent battle with the giants, but no one was armed. No one attacked.

Entire families had gathered to see the newcomers. Annabeth saw couples with babies, toddlers clinging to their parents' legs, even some elderly folks in a combination of Roman robes and modern clothes. Were all of them demigods? Annabeth suspected so, though she'd never seen a place like this. At Camp Half-Blood, most demigods were teens. If they survived long enough to graduate from high school, they either stayed on as counselors or left to start lives as best they could in the mortal world. Here, it was an entire multigenerational community.

At the far end of the crowd, Annabeth spotted

Tyson the Cyclops and Percy's hellhound, Mrs. O'Leary—who had been the first scouting party from Camp Half-Blood to reach Camp Jupiter. They looked to be in good spirits. Tyson waved and grinned. He was wearing an SPQR banner like a giant bib.

Some part of Annabeth's mind registered how beautiful the city was—the smells from the bakeries, the gurgling fountains, the flowers blooming in the gardens. And the architecture... gods, the architecture—gilded marble columns, dazzling mosaics, monumental arches, and terraced villas.

In front of her, the demigods made way for a girl in full Roman armor and a purple cape. Dark hair tumbled across her shoulders. Her eyes were as black as obsidian.

Reyna.

Jason had described her well. Even without that, Annabeth would have singled her out as the leader. Medals decorated her armor. She carried herself with such confidence the other demigods backed away and averted their gaze.

Annabeth recognized something else in her face, too—in the hard set of her mouth and the deliberate way she raised her chin like she was ready to accept any challenge. Reyna was forcing a look of courage, while holding back a mixture of hopefulness and worry and fear that she couldn't show in public.

Annabeth knew that expression. She saw it every time she looked in a mirror.

The two girls considered each other. Annabeth's friends fanned out on either side. The Romans murmured Jason's name, staring at him in awe.

Then someone else appeared from the crowd, and Annabeth's vision tunneled.

Percy smiled at her—that sarcastic, troublemaker smile that had annoyed her for years but eventually had become endearing. His sea-green eyes were as gorgeous as she remembered. His dark hair was swept to one side, like he'd just come from a walk on the beach. He looked even better than he had six months ago—tanner and taller, leaner and more muscular.

Annabeth was too stunned to move. She felt that if she got any closer to him, all the molecules in her body might combust. She'd secretly had a crush on him since they were twelve years old. Last summer, she'd fallen for him hard. They'd been a happy couple for four months—and then he'd disappeared.

During their separation, something had happened to Annabeth's feelings. They'd grown painfully intense—like she'd been forced to withdraw from a life-saving medication. Now she wasn't sure which was more excruciating—living with that horrible absence, or being with him again.

The praetor Reyna straightened. With apparent

reluctance, she turned toward Jason.

“Jason Grace, my former colleague...” She spoke the word *colleague* like it was a dangerous thing. “I welcome you home. And these, your friends—”

Annabeth didn’t mean to, but she surged forward. Percy rushed toward her at the same time. The crowd tensed. Some reached for swords that weren’t there.

Percy threw his arms around her. They kissed, and for a moment nothing else mattered. An asteroid could have hit the planet and wiped out all life, and Annabeth wouldn’t have cared.

Percy smelled of ocean air. His lips were salty.

Seaweed Brain, she thought giddily.

Percy pulled away and studied her face. “Gods, I never thought—”

Annabeth grabbed his wrist and flipped him over her shoulder. He slammed into the stone pavement. Romans cried out. Some surged forward, but Reyna shouted, “Hold! Stand down!”

Annabeth put her knee on Percy’s chest. She pushed her forearm against his throat. She didn’t care what the Romans thought. A white-hot lump of anger expanded in her chest—a tumor of worry and bitterness that she’d been carrying around since last autumn.

“If you *ever* leave me again,” she said, her eyes stinging, “I swear to all the gods—”

Percy had the nerve to laugh. Suddenly the lump of

heated emotions melted inside Annabeth.

“Consider me warned,” Percy said. “I missed you, too.”

Annabeth rose and helped him to his feet. She wanted to kiss him again *so* badly, but she managed to restrain herself.

Jason cleared his throat. “So, yeah.... It’s good to be back.”

He introduced Reyna to Piper, who looked a little miffed that she hadn’t gotten to say the lines she’d been practicing, then to Leo, who grinned and flashed a peace sign.

“And this is Annabeth,” Jason said. “Uh, normally she doesn’t judo-flip people.”

Reyna’s eyes sparkled. “You sure you’re not a Roman, Annabeth? Or an Amazon?”

Annabeth didn’t know if that was a compliment, but she held out her hand. “I only attack my boyfriend like that,” she promised. “Pleased to meet you.”

Reyna clasped her hand firmly. “It seems we have a lot to discuss. Centurions!”

A few of the Roman campers hustled forward—apparently the senior officers. Two kids appeared at Percy’s side, the same ones Annabeth had seen him chumming around with earlier. The burly Asian guy with the buzz cut was about fifteen. He was cute in a sort of oversized-cuddly-panda-bear way. The girl was

younger, maybe thirteen, with amber eyes and chocolate skin and long curly hair. Her cavalry helmet was tucked under her arm.

Annabeth could tell from their body language that they felt close to Percy. They stood next to him protectively, like they'd already shared many adventures. She fought down a twinge of jealousy. Was it possible Percy and this girl...no. The chemistry between the three of them wasn't like that. Annabeth had spent her whole life learning to read people. It was a survival skill. If she had to guess, she'd say the big Asian guy was the girl's boyfriend, though she suspected they hadn't been together long.

There was one thing she didn't understand: what was the girl staring at? She kept frowning in Piper and Leo's direction, like she recognized one of them and the memory was painful.

Meanwhile, Reyna was giving orders to her officers. "...tell the legion to stand down. Dakota, alert the spirits in the kitchen. Tell them to prepare a welcome feast. And, Octavian—"

"You're letting these intruders into the *camp*?" A tall guy with stringy blond hair elbowed his way forward. "Reyna, the security risks—"

"We're not taking them to the camp, Octavian." Reyna flashed him a stern look. "We'll eat here, in the forum."

“Oh, *much* better,” Octavian grumbled. He seemed to be the only one who didn’t defer to Reyna as his superior, despite the fact that he was scrawny and pale and for some reason had three teddy bears hanging from his belt. “You want us to relax in the shadow of their warship.”

“These are our guests.” Reyna clipped off every word. “We will welcome them, and we will talk to them. As augur, you should burn an offering to thank the gods for bringing Jason back to us safely.”

“Good idea,” Percy put in. “Go burn your bears, Octavian.”

Reyna looked like she was trying not to smile. “You have my orders. Go.”

The officers dispersed. Octavian shot Percy a look of absolute loathing. Then he gave Annabeth a suspicious once-over and stalked away.

Percy slipped his hand into Annabeth’s. “Don’t worry about Octavian,” he said. “Most of the Romans are good people—like Frank and Hazel here, and Reyna. We’ll be fine.”

Annabeth felt as if someone had draped a cold washcloth across her neck. She heard that whispering laughter again, as if the presence had followed her from the ship.

She looked up at the *Argo II*. Its massive bronze hull glittered in the sunlight. Part of her wanted to

kidnap Percy right now, climb on board, and get out of here while they still could.

She couldn't shake the feeling that something was about to go terribly wrong. And there was no way she would ever risk losing Percy again.

"We'll be fine," she repeated, trying to believe it.

"Excellent," Reyna said. She turned to Jason, and Annabeth thought there was a hungry sort of gleam in her eyes. "Let's talk, and we can have a proper reunion."

ANNABETH

ANNABETH WISHED SHE HAD AN APPETITE, because the Romans knew how to eat.

Sets of couches and low tables were carted into the forum until it resembled a furniture showroom. Romans lounged in groups of ten or twenty, talking and laughing while wind spirits—*aurae*—swirled overhead, bringing an endless assortment of pizzas, sandwiches, chips, cold drinks, and fresh-baked cookies. Drifting through the crowd were purple ghosts—Lares—in togas and legionnaire armor. Around the edges of the feast, satyrs (no, *fauns*, Annabeth thought) trotted from table to table, panhandling for food and spare change. In the nearby fields, the war elephant frolicked with Mrs. O’Leary, and children played tag around the statues of Terminus that lined the city limits.

The whole scene was so familiar yet so completely alien that it gave Annabeth vertigo.

All she wanted to do was be with Percy—preferably alone. She knew she would have to wait. If their quest was going to succeed, they needed these Romans, which meant getting to know them and building some goodwill.

Reyna and a few of her officers (including the blond kid Octavian, freshly back from burning a teddy bear for the gods) sat with Annabeth and her crew. Percy joined them with his two new friends, Frank and Hazel.

As a tornado of food platters settled onto the table, Percy leaned over and whispered, “I want to show you around New Rome. Just you and me. The place is incredible.”

Annabeth should’ve felt thrilled. *Just you and me* was exactly what she wanted. Instead, resentment swelled in her throat. How could Percy talk so enthusiastically about this place? What about Camp Half-Blood—their camp, their home?

She tried not to stare at the new marks on Percy’s forearm—an SPQR tattoo like Jason’s. At Camp Half-Blood, demigods got bead necklaces to commemorate years of training. Here, the Romans burned a tattoo into your flesh, as if to say: *You belong to us. Permanently.*

She swallowed back some biting comments. “Okay. Sure.”

“I’ve been thinking,” he said nervously. “I had this

idea—”

He stopped as Reyna called a toast to friendship.

After introductions all around, the Romans and Annabeth’s crew began exchanging stories. Jason explained how he’d arrived at Camp Half-Blood without his memory, and how he’d gone on a quest with Piper and Leo to rescue the goddess Hera (or Juno, take your pick—she was equally annoying in Greek or Roman) from imprisonment at the Wolf House in northern California.

“Impossible!” Octavian broke in. “That’s our most sacred place. If the giants had imprisoned a goddess there—”

“They would’ve destroyed her,” Piper said. “And blamed it on the Greeks, and started a war between the camps. Now, be quiet and let Jason finish.”

Octavian opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Annabeth really loved Piper’s charmspeak. She noticed Reyna looking back and forth between Jason and Piper, her brow creased, as if just beginning to realize the two of them were a couple.

“So,” Jason continued, “that’s how we found out about the earth goddess Gaea. She’s still half asleep, but she’s the one freeing the monsters from Tartarus and raising the giants. Porphyron, the big leader dude we fought at the Wolf House: he said he was retreating to the ancient lands—Greece itself. He plans on

awakening Gaea and destroying the gods by... what did he call it? *Pulling up their roots.*”

Percy nodded thoughtfully. “Gaea’s been busy over here, too. We had our own encounter with Queen Dirt Face.”

Percy recounted his side of the story. He talked about waking up at the Wolf House with no memories except for one name—*Annabeth.*

When she heard that, Annabeth had to try hard not to cry. Percy told them how he’d traveled to Alaska with Frank and Hazel—how they’d defeated the giant Alcyoneus, freed the death god Thanatos, and returned with the lost golden eagle standard of the Roman camp to repel an attack by the giants’ army.

When Percy had finished, Jason whistled appreciatively. “No wonder they made you praetor.”

Octavian snorted. “Which means we now have *three* praetors! The rules clearly state we can only have two!”

“On the bright side,” Percy said, “both Jason *and* I outrank you, Octavian. So we can *both* tell you to shut up.”

Octavian turned as purple as a Roman T-shirt. Jason gave Percy a fist bump.

Even Reyna managed a smile, though her eyes were stormy.

“We’ll have to figure out the extra praetor problem

later,” she said. “Right now we have more serious issues to deal with.”

“I’ll step aside for Jason,” Percy said easily. “It’s no biggie.”

“No *biggie*?” Octavian choked. “The praetorship of Rome is *no biggie*?”

Percy ignored him and turned to Jason. “You’re Thalia Grace’s brother, huh? Wow. You guys look nothing alike.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” Jason said. “Anyway, thanks for helping my camp while I was gone. You did an awesome job.”

“Back at you,” Percy said.

Annabeth kicked his shin. She hated to interrupt a budding bromance, but Reyna was right: they had serious things to discuss. “We should talk about the Great Prophecy. It sounds like the Romans are aware of it too?”

Reyna nodded. “We call it the Prophecy of Seven. - Octavian, you have it committed to memory?”

“Of course,” he said. “But, Reyna—”

“Recite it, please. In English, not Latin.”

Octavian sighed. “*Seven half-bloods shall answer the call. To storm or fire the world must fall—*”

“*An oath to keep with a final breath,*” Annabeth continued. “*And foes bear arms to the Doors of Death.*”

Everyone stared at her—except for Leo, who had constructed a pinwheel out of aluminum foil taco wrappers and was sticking it into passing wind spirits.

Annabeth wasn't sure why she had blurted out the lines of the prophecy. She'd just felt compelled.

The big kid, Frank, sat forward, staring at her in fascination, as if she'd grown a third eye. "Is it true you're a child of Min—I mean, Athena?"

"Yes," she said, suddenly feeling defensive. "Why is that such a surprise?"

Octavian scoffed. "If you're truly a child of the *wisdom* goddess—"

"Enough," Reyna snapped. "Annabeth is what she says. She's here in peace. Besides..." She gave Annabeth a look of grudging respect. "Percy has spoken highly of you."

The undertones in Reyna's voice took Annabeth a moment to decipher. Percy looked down, suddenly interested in his cheeseburger.

Annabeth's face felt hot. Oh, gods...Reyna had tried to make a move on Percy. That explained the tinge of bitterness, maybe even envy, in her words. Percy had turned her down for Annabeth.

At that moment, Annabeth forgave her ridiculous boyfriend for everything he'd ever done wrong. She wanted to throw her arms around him, but she commanded herself to stay cool.

“Uh, thanks,” she told Reyna. “At any rate, some of the prophecy is becoming clear. Foes bearing arms to the Doors of Death...that means Romans and Greeks. We have to combine forces to find those doors.”

Hazel, the girl with the cavalry helmet and the long curly hair, picked up something next to her plate. It looked like a large ruby; but before Annabeth could be sure, Hazel slipped it into the pocket of her denim shirt.

“My brother, Nico, went looking for the doors,” she said.

“Wait,” Annabeth said. “Nico di Angelo? He’s your brother?”

Hazel nodded as if this were obvious. A dozen more questions crowded into Annabeth’s head, but it was already spinning like Leo’s pinwheel. She decided to let the matter go. “Okay. You were saying?”

“He disappeared.” Hazel moistened her lips. “I’m afraid...I’m not sure, but I think something’s happened to him.”

“We’ll look for him,” Percy promised. “We have to find the Doors of Death anyway. Thanatos told us we’d find both answers in Rome—like, the *original* Rome. That’s on the way to Greece, right?”

“Thanatos told you this?” Annabeth tried to wrap her mind around *that* idea. “The death god?”

She’d met many gods. She’d even been to the Underworld; but Percy’s story about freeing the

incarnation of death itself really creeped her out.

Percy took a bite of his burger. “Now that Death is free, monsters will disintegrate and return to Tartarus again like they used to. But as long as the Doors of Death are open, they’ll just keep coming back.”

Piper twisted the feather in her hair. “Like water leaking through a dam,” she suggested.

“Yeah.” Percy smiled. “We’ve got a dam hole.”

“What?” Piper asked.

“Nothing,” he said. “Inside joke. The point is we’ll have to find the doors and close them before we can head to Greece. It’s the only way we’ll stand a chance of defeating the giants and making sure they *stay* defeated.”

Reyna plucked an apple from a passing fruit tray. She turned it in her fingers, studying the dark red surface. “You propose an expedition to Greece in your warship. You do realize that the ancient lands—and the Mare Nostrum—are dangerous?”

“Mary who?” Leo asked.

“Mare Nostrum,” Jason explained. “*Our Sea*. It’s what the Ancient Romans called the Mediterranean.”

Reyna nodded. “The territory that was once the Roman Empire is not only the birthplace of the gods. It’s also the ancestral home of the monsters, Titans and giants...and worse things. As dangerous as travel is for demigods here in America, *there* it would be ten times

worse.”

“You said Alaska would be bad,” Percy reminded her. “We survived that.”

Reyna shook her head. Her fingernails cut little crescents into the apple as she turned it. “Percy, traveling in the Mediterranean is a different level of danger altogether. It’s been off limits to Roman demigods for centuries. No hero in his right mind would go there.”

“Then we’re good!” Leo grinned over the top of his pinwheel. “Because we’re all crazy, right? Besides, the *Argo II* is a top-of-the-line warship. She’ll get us through.”

“We’ll have to hurry,” Jason added. “I don’t know exactly what the giants are planning, but Gaea is growing more conscious all the time. She’s invading dreams, appearing in weird places, summoning more and more powerful monsters. We have to stop the giants before they can wake her up fully.”

Annabeth shuddered. She’d had her own share of nightmares lately.

“*Seven half-bloods must answer the call,*” she said. “It needs to be a mix from both our camps. Jason, Piper, Leo, and me. That’s four.”

“And me,” Percy said. “Along with Hazel and Frank. That’s seven.”

“What?” Octavian shot to his feet. “We’re just

supposed to *accept* that? Without a vote in the senate? Without a proper debate? Without—”

“Percy!” Tyson the Cyclops bounded toward them with Mrs. O’Leary at his heels. On the hellhound’s back sat the skinniest harpy Annabeth had ever seen—a sickly-looking girl with stringy red hair, a sackcloth dress, and red-feathered wings.

Annabeth didn’t know where the harpy had come from, but her heart warmed to see Tyson in his tattered flannel and denim with the backward SPQR banner across his chest. She’d had some pretty bad experiences with Cyclopes, but Tyson was a sweetheart. He was also Percy’s half brother (long story), which made him almost like family.

Tyson stopped by their couch and wrung his meaty hands. His big brown eye was full of concern. “Ella is scared,” he said.

“N-n-no more boats,” the harpy muttered to herself, picking furiously at her feathers. “*Titanic*, *Lusitania*, *Pax*... boats are not for harpies.”

Leo squinted. He looked at Hazel, who was seated next to him. “Did that chicken girl just compare *my* ship to the *Titanic*?”

“She’s not a chicken.” Hazel averted her eyes, as if Leo made her nervous. “Ella’s a harpy. She’s just a little... high-strung.”

“Ella is pretty,” Tyson said. “And scared. We need

to take her away, but she will not go on the ship.”

“No ships,” Ella repeated. She looked straight at Annabeth. “Bad luck. There she is. Wisdom’s daughter walks alone—”

“Ella!” Frank stood suddenly. “Maybe it’s not the best time—”

“The Mark of Athena burns through Rome,” Ella continued, cupping her hands over her ears and raising her voice. *“Twins snuff out the angel’s breath, Who holds the key to endless death. Giants’ bane stands gold and pale, Won through pain from a woven jail.”*

The effect was like someone dropping a flash grenade on the table. Everyone stared at the harpy. No one spoke. Annabeth’s heart was pounding. *The Mark of Athena...* She resisted the urge to check her pocket, but she could feel the silver coin growing warmer—the cursed gift from her mother. *Follow the Mark of Athena. Avenge me.*

Around them, the sounds of the feast continued, but muted and distant, as if their little cluster of couches had slipped into a quieter dimension.

Percy was the first to recover. He stood and took Tyson’s arm.

“I know!” he said with feigned enthusiasm. “How about you take Ella to get some fresh air? You and Mrs. O’Leary—”

“Hold on.” Octavian gripped one of his teddy bears,

strangling it with shaking hands. His eyes fixed on Ella. “What was that she said? It sounded like—”

“Ella reads a lot,” Frank blurted out. “We found her at a library.”

“Yes!” Hazel said. “Probably just something she read in a book.”

“Books,” Ella muttered helpfully. “Ella likes books.”

Now that she’d said her piece, the harpy seemed more relaxed. She sat cross-legged on Mrs. O’Leary’s back, preening her wings.

Annabeth gave Percy a curious glance. Obviously, he and Frank and Hazel were hiding something. Just as obviously, Ella had recited a prophecy—a prophecy that concerned *her*.

Percy’s expression said, *Help*.

“That was a prophecy,” Octavian insisted. “It sounded like a prophecy.”

No one answered.

Annabeth wasn’t exactly sure what was going on, but she understood that Percy was on the verge of big trouble.

She forced a laugh. “Really, Octavian? Maybe harpies are different here, on the Roman side. Ours have just enough intelligence to clean cabins and cook lunches. Do yours usually foretell the future? Do you consult them for your auguries?”

Her words had the intended effect. The Roman officers laughed nervously. Some sized up Ella, then looked at Octavian and snorted. The idea of a chicken lady issuing prophecies was apparently just as ridiculous to Romans as it was to Greeks.

“I, uh...” Octavian dropped his teddy bear. “No, but—”

“She’s just spouting lines from some book,” Annabeth said, “like Hazel suggested. Besides, we already have a *real* prophecy to worry about.”

She turned to Tyson. “Percy’s right. Why don’t you take Ella and Mrs. O’Leary and shadow-travel somewhere for a while. Is Ella okay with that?”

“Large dogs are good,” Ella said. “*Old Yeller*, 1957, screenplay by Fred Gipson and William Tunberg.”

Annabeth wasn’t sure how to take that answer, but Percy smiled like the problem was solved.

“Great!” Percy said. “We’ll Iris-message you guys when we’re done and catch up with you later.”

The Romans looked at Reyna, waiting for her ruling. Annabeth held her breath.

Reyna had an excellent poker face. She studied Ella, but Annabeth couldn’t guess what she was thinking.

“Fine,” the praetor said at last. “Go.”

“Yay!” Tyson went around the couches and gave

everyone a big hug—even Octavian, who didn't look happy about it. Then he climbed on Mrs. O'Leary's back with Ella, and the hellhound bounded out of the forum. They dove straight into a shadow on the Senate House wall and disappeared.

"Well." Reyna set down her uneaten apple. "Octavian is right about one thing. We must gain the senate's approval before we let any of our legionnaires go on a quest—especially one as dangerous as you're suggesting."

"This whole thing smells of treachery," Octavian grumbled. "That trireme is not a ship of peace!"

"Come aboard, man," Leo offered. "I'll give you a tour. You can steer the boat, and if you're really good I'll give you a little paper captain's hat to wear."

Octavian's nostrils flared. "How dare you—"

"It's a good idea," Reyna said. "Octavian, go with him. See the ship. We'll convene a senate meeting in one hour."

"But..." Octavian stopped. Apparently he could tell from Reyna's expression that further arguing would not be good for his health. "Fine."

Leo got up. He turned to Annabeth, and his smile changed. It happened so quickly, Annabeth thought she'd imagined it; but just for a moment someone else seemed to be standing in Leo's place, smiling coldly with a cruel light in his eyes. Then Annabeth blinked,

and Leo was just regular old Leo again, with his usual impish grin.

“Back soon,” he promised. “This is gonna be epic.”

A horrible chill settled over her. As Leo and Octavian headed for the rope ladder, she thought about calling them back—but how could she explain that? Tell everyone she was going crazy, seeing things and feeling cold?

The wind spirits began clearing the plates.

“Uh, Reyna,” Jason said, “if you don’t mind, I’d like to show Piper around before the senate meeting. She’s never seen New Rome.”

Reyna’s expression hardened.

Annabeth wondered how Jason could be so dense. Was it possible he really didn’t understand how much Reyna liked him? It was obvious enough to Annabeth. Asking to show his new girlfriend around Reyna’s city was rubbing salt in a wound.

“Of course,” Reyna said coldly.

Percy took Annabeth’s hand. “Yeah, me, too. I’d like to show Annabeth—”

“No,” Reyna snapped.

Percy knit his eyebrows. “Sorry?”

“I’d like a few words with Annabeth,” Reyna said. “Alone. If you don’t mind, my fellow praetor.”

Her tone made it clear she wasn’t really asking permission.

The chill spread down Annabeth's back. She wondered what Reyna was up to. Maybe the praetor didn't like the idea of *two* guys who had rejected her giving their girlfriends tours of her city. Or maybe there was something she wanted to say in private. Either way, Annabeth was reluctant to be alone and unarmed with the Roman leader.

"Come, daughter of Athena." Reyna rose from her couch. "Walk with me."

ANNABETH

ANNABETH WANTED TO HATE NEW ROME. But as an - aspiring architect, she couldn't help admiring the terraced gardens, the fountains and temples, the winding cobblestone streets and gleaming white villas. After the Titan War last summer, she'd gotten her dream job of redesigning the palaces of Mount Olympus. Now, walking through this miniature city, she kept thinking, *I should have made a dome like that. I love the way those columns lead into that courtyard.* Whoever designed New Rome had clearly poured a lot of time and love into the project.

"We have the best architects and builders in the world," Reyna said, as if reading her thoughts. "Rome always did, in the ancient times. Many demigods stay on to live here after their time in the legion. They go to our university. They settle down to raise families. Percy seemed interested in this fact."

Annabeth wondered what *that* meant. She must have scowled more fiercely than she realized, because Reyna laughed.

“You’re a warrior, all right,” the praetor said. “You’ve got fire in your eyes.”

“Sorry.” Annabeth tried to tone down the glare.

“Don’t be. I’m the daughter of Bellona.”

“Roman goddess of war?”

Reyna nodded. She turned and whistled like she was hailing a cab. A moment later, two metal dogs raced toward them—automaton greyhounds, one silver and one gold. They brushed against Reyna’s legs and regarded Annabeth with glistening ruby eyes.

“My pets,” Reyna explained. “Aurum and Argentum. You don’t mind if they walk with us?”

Again, Annabeth got the feeling it wasn’t really a request. She noted that the greyhounds had teeth like steel arrowheads. Maybe weapons weren’t allowed inside the city, but Reyna’s pets could still tear her to pieces if they chose.

Reyna led her to an outdoor café, where the waiter clearly knew her. He smiled and handed her a to-go cup, then offered one to Annabeth.

“Would you like some?” Reyna asked. “They make wonderful hot chocolate. Not really a Roman drink—”

“But chocolate is universal,” Annabeth said.

“Exactly.”

It was a warm June afternoon, but Annabeth accepted the cup with thanks. The two of them walked on, Reyna's gold and silver dogs roaming nearby.

"In our camp," Reyna said, "Athena is Minerva. Are you familiar with how her Roman form is different?"

Annabeth hadn't really considered it before. She remembered the way Terminus had called Athena *that* goddess, as if she were scandalous. Octavian had acted like Annabeth's very existence was an insult.

"I take it Minerva isn't...uh, quite as respected here?"

Reyna blew steam from her cup. "We *respect* Minerva. She's the goddess of crafts and wisdom...but she isn't really a goddess of war. Not for Romans. She's also a maiden goddess, like Diana...the one you call Artemis. You won't find any children of Minerva here. The idea that Minerva would *have* children—frankly, it's a little shocking to us."

"Oh." Annabeth felt her face flush. She didn't want to get into the details of Athena's children—how they were born straight from the mind of the goddess, just as Athena herself had sprung from the head of Zeus. Talking about that always made Annabeth feel self-conscious, like she was some sort of freak. People usually asked her whether or not she had a belly button, since she had been born magically. *Of course* she had a

belly button. She couldn't explain how. She didn't really want to know.

"I understand that you Greeks don't see things the same way," Reyna continued. "But Romans take vows of maidenhood very seriously. The Vestal Virgins, for instance... if they broke their vows and fell in love with anyone, they would be buried alive. So the idea that a maiden goddess would have children—"

"Got it." Annabeth's hot chocolate suddenly tasted like dust. No wonder the Romans had been giving her strange looks. "I'm not supposed to exist. And even if your camp *had* children of Minerva—"

"They wouldn't be like you," Reyna said. "They might be craftsmen, artists, maybe advisers, but not warriors. Not leaders of dangerous quests."

Annabeth started to object that she wasn't the leader of the quest. Not officially. But she wondered if her friends on the *Argo II* would agree. The past few days, they had been looking to her for orders—even Jason, who could have pulled rank as the son of Jupiter, and Coach Hedge, who didn't take orders from anyone.

"There's more." Reyna snapped her fingers, and her golden dog, Aurum, trotted over. The praetor stroked his ears. "The harpy Ella... it *was* a prophecy she spoke. We both know that, don't we?"

Annabeth swallowed. Something about Aurum's ruby eyes made her uneasy. She had heard that dogs

could smell fear, even detect changes in a human's breathing and heartbeat. She didn't know if that applied to magical metal dogs, but she decided it would be better to tell the truth.

"It sounded like a prophecy," she admitted. "But I've never met Ella before today, and I've never heard those lines exactly."

"I have," Reyna murmured. "At least some of them —"

A few yards away, the silver dog barked. A group of children spilled out of a nearby alleyway and gathered around Argentum, petting the dog and laughing, unfazed by its razor-sharp teeth.

"We should move on," Reyna said.

They wound their way up the hill. The greyhounds followed, leaving the children behind. Annabeth kept glancing at Reyna's face. A vague memory started tugging at her—the way Reyna brushed her hair behind her ear, the silver ring she wore with the torch and sword design.

"We've met before," Annabeth ventured. "You were younger, I think."

Reyna gave her a dry smile. "Very good. Percy didn't remember me. Of course you spoke mostly with my older sister Hylla, who is now queen of the Amazons. She left just this morning, before you arrived. At any rate, when we last met, I was a mere

handmaiden in the house of Circe.”

“Circe...” Annabeth remembered her trip to the island of the sorceress. She’d been thirteen. Percy and she had washed ashore from the Sea of Monsters. Hylla had welcomed them. She had helped Annabeth get cleaned up and given her a beautiful new dress and a complete makeover. Then Circe had made her sales pitch: if Annabeth stayed on the island, she could have magical training and incredible power. Annabeth had been tempted, maybe just a little, until she realized the place was a trap, and Percy had been turned into a rodent. (That last part seemed funny afterward; but at the time, it had been terrifying.) As for Reyna... she’d been one of the servants who had combed Annabeth’s hair.

“You...” Annabeth said in amazement. “And Hylla is queen of the Amazons? How did you two—?”

“Long story,” Reyna said. “But I remember you well. You were brave. I’d never seen anyone refuse Circe’s hospitality, much less outwit her. It’s no wonder Percy cares for you.”

Her voice was wistful. Annabeth thought it might be safer not to respond.

They reached the top of the hill, where a terrace overlooked the entire valley.

“This is my favorite spot,” Reyna said. “The Garden of Bacchus.”

Grapevine trellises made a canopy overhead. Bees buzzed through honeysuckle and jasmine, which filled the afternoon air with a dizzying mix of perfumes. In the middle of the terrace stood a statue of Bacchus in a sort of ballet position, wearing nothing but a loincloth, his cheeks puffed out and lips pursed, spouting water into a fountain.

Despite her worries, Annabeth almost laughed. She knew the god in his Greek form, Dionysus—or Mr. D, as they called him back at Camp Half-Blood. Seeing their cranky old camp director immortalized in stone, wearing a diaper and spewing water from his mouth, made her feel a little better.

Reyna stopped at the edge of the terrace. The view was worth the climb. The whole city spread out below them like a 3-D mosaic. To the south, beyond the lake, a cluster of temples perched on a hill. To the north, an aqueduct marched toward the Berkeley Hills. Work crews were repairing a broken section, probably damaged in the recent battle.

“I wanted to hear it from you,” Reyna said.

Annabeth turned. “Hear *what* from me?”

“The truth,” Reyna said. “Convince me that I’m not making a mistake by trusting you. Tell me about yourself. Tell me about Camp Half-Blood. Your friend Piper has sorcery in her words. I spent enough time with Circe to know charmspeak when I hear it. I can’t

trust what she says. And Jason...well, he has changed. He seems distant, no longer quite Roman.”

The hurt in her voice was as sharp as broken glass. Annabeth wondered if *she* had sounded that way, all the months she’d spent searching for Percy. At least she’d found her boyfriend. Reyna had no one. She was responsible for running an entire camp all by herself. Annabeth could sense that Reyna wanted Jason to love her. But he had disappeared, only to come back with a new girlfriend. Meanwhile, Percy had risen to praetor, but he had rebuffed Reyna too. Now Annabeth had come to take him away. Reyna would be left alone again, shouldering a job meant for two people.

When Annabeth had arrived at Camp Jupiter, she’d been prepared to negotiate with Reyna or even fight her if needed. She hadn’t been prepared to feel sorry for her.

She kept that feeling hidden. Reyna didn’t strike her as someone who would appreciate pity.

Instead, she told Reyna about her own life. She talked about her dad and stepmom and her two stepbrothers in San Francisco, and how she had felt like an outsider in her own family. She talked about how she had run away when she was only seven, finding her friends Luke and Thalia and making her way to Camp Half-Blood on Long Island. She described the camp and her years growing up there. She talked about

meeting Percy and the adventures they'd had together.

Reyna was a good listener.

Annabeth was tempted to tell her about more recent problems: her fight with her mom, the gift of the silver coin, and the nightmares she'd been having—about an old fear so paralyzing, she'd almost decided that she couldn't go on this quest. But she couldn't bring herself to open up quite that much.

When Annabeth was done talking, Reyna gazed over New Rome. Her metal greyhounds sniffed around the garden, snapping at bees in the honeysuckle. Finally Reyna pointed to the cluster of temples on the distant hill.

"The small red building," she said, "there on the northern side? That's the temple of my mother, Bellona." Reyna turned toward Annabeth. "Unlike your mother, Bellona has no Greek equivalent. She is fully, truly Roman. She's the goddess of protecting the homeland."

Annabeth said nothing. She knew very little about the Roman goddess. She wished she had studied up, but Latin never came as easily to her as Greek. Down below, the hull of the *Argo II* gleamed as it floated over the forum, like some massive bronze party balloon.

"When the Romans go to war," Reyna continued, "we first visit the Temple of Bellona. Inside is a symbolic patch of ground that represents enemy soil."

We throw a spear into that ground, indicating that we are now at war. You see, Romans have always believed that offense is the best defense. In ancient times, whenever our ancestors felt threatened by their neighbors, they would invade to protect themselves.”

“They conquered everyone around them,” Annabeth said. “Carthage, the Gauls—”

“And the Greeks.” Reyna let that comment hang. “My point, Annabeth, is that it isn’t Rome’s nature to cooperate with other powers. Every time Greek and Roman demigods have met, we’ve fought. Conflicts between our two sides have started some of the most horrible wars in human history—especially civil wars.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way,” Annabeth said. “We’ve got to work together, or Gaea will destroy us both.”

“I agree,” Reyna said. “But is cooperation possible? What if Juno’s plan is flawed? Even goddesses can make mistakes.”

Annabeth waited for Reyna to get struck by lightning or turned into a peacock. Nothing happened.

Unfortunately, Annabeth shared Reyna’s doubts. Hera *did* make mistakes. Annabeth had had nothing but trouble from that overbearing goddess, and she’d never forgive Hera for taking Percy away, even if it was for a noble cause.

“I don’t trust the goddess,” Annabeth admitted.

“But I do trust my friends. This isn’t a trick, Reyna. We *can* work together.”

Reyna finished her cup of chocolate. She set the cup on the terrace railing and gazed over the valley as if imagining battle lines.

“I believe you mean it,” she said. “But if you go to the ancient lands, especially Rome itself, there is something you should know about your mother.”

Annabeth’s shoulders tensed. “My—my mother?”

“When I lived on Circe’s island,” Reyna said, “we had many visitors. Once, perhaps a year before you and Percy arrived, a young man washed ashore. He was half mad from thirst and heat. He’d been drifting at sea for days. His words didn’t make much sense, but he said he was a son of Athena.”

Reyna paused as if waiting for a reaction. Annabeth had no idea who the boy might have been. She wasn’t aware of any other Athena kids who’d gone on a quest in the Sea of Monsters, but still she felt a sense of dread. The light filtering through the grapevines made shadows writhe across the ground like a swarm of bugs.

“What happened to this demigod?” she asked.

Reyna waved her hand as if the question was trivial. “Circe turned him into a guinea pig, of course. He made quite a crazy little rodent. But *before* that, he kept raving about his failed quest. He claimed that he’d gone to Rome, following the Mark of Athena.”

Annabeth grabbed the railing to keep her balance.

“Yes,” Reyna said, seeing her discomfort. “He kept muttering about wisdom’s child, the Mark of Athena, and the giants’ bane standing pale and gold. The same lines Ella was just reciting. But you say that you’ve never heard them before today?”

“Not—not the way Ella said them.” Annabeth’s voice was weak. She wasn’t lying. She’d never heard that prophecy, but her mother had charged her with following the Mark of Athena; and as she thought about the coin in her pocket, a horrible suspicion began taking root in her mind. She remembered her mother’s scathing words. She thought about the strange nightmares she’d been having lately. “Did this demigod—did he explain his quest?”

Reyna shook her head. “At the time, I had no idea what he was talking about. Much later, when I became praetor of Camp Jupiter, I began to suspect.”

“Suspect... what?”

“There is an old legend that the praetors of Camp Jupiter have passed down through the centuries. If it’s true, it may explain why our two groups of demigods have never been able to work together. It may be the cause of our animosity. Until this old score is finally settled, so the legend goes, Romans and Greeks will never be at peace. And the legend centers on Athena—”

A shrill sound pierced the air. Light flashed in the

corner of Annabeth's eye.

She turned in time to see an explosion blast a new crater in the forum. A burning couch tumbled through the air. Demigods scattered in panic.

"Giants?" Annabeth reached for her dagger, which of course wasn't there. "I thought their army was defeated!"

"It isn't the giants." Reyna's eyes seethed with rage. "You've betrayed our trust."

"What? No!"

As soon as she said it, the *Argo II* launched a second volley. Its port ballista fired a massive spear wreathed in Greek fire, which sailed straight through the broken dome of the Senate House and exploded inside, lighting up the building like a jack-o'-lantern. If anyone had been in there...

"Gods, no." A wave of nausea almost made Annabeth's knees buckle. "Reyna, it isn't possible. We'd never do this!"

The metal dogs ran to their mistress's side. They snarled at Annabeth but paced uncertainly, as if reluctant to attack.

"You're telling the truth," Reyna judged. "Perhaps you were not aware of this treachery, but *someone* must pay."

Down in the forum, chaos was spreading. Crowds were pushing and shoving. Fistfights were breaking

out.

“Bloodshed,” Reyna said.

“We have to stop it!”

Annabeth had a horrible feeling this might be the last time Reyna and she ever acted in agreement, but together they ran down the hill.

If weapons had been allowed in the city, Annabeth’s friends would have already been dead. The Roman demigods in the forum had coalesced into an angry mob. Some threw plates, food, and rocks at the *Argo II*, which was pointless, as most of the stuff fell back into the crowd.

Several dozen Romans had surrounded Piper and Jason, who were trying to calm them without much luck. Piper’s charmspeak was useless against so many screaming, angry demigods. Jason’s forehead was bleeding. His purple cloak had been ripped to shreds. He kept pleading, “I’m on your side!” but his orange Camp Half-Blood T-shirt didn’t help matters—nor did the warship overhead, firing flaming spears into New Rome. One landed nearby and blasted a toga shop to rubble.

“Pluto’s pauldrons,” Reyna cursed. “Look.”

Armed legionnaires were hurrying toward the forum. Two artillery crews had set up catapults just outside the Pomerian Line and were preparing to fire at

the *Argo II*.

“That’ll just make things worse,” Annabeth said.

“I hate my job,” Reyna growled. She rushed off toward the legionnaires, her dogs at her side.

Percy, Annabeth thought, scanning the forum desperately. *Where are you?*

Two Romans tried to grab her. She ducked past them, plunging into the crowd. As if the angry Romans, burning couches, and exploding buildings weren’t confusing enough, hundreds of purple ghosts drifted through the forum, passing straight through the demigods’ bodies and wailing incoherently. The fauns had also taken advantage of the chaos. They swarmed the dining tables, grabbing food, plates, and cups. One trotted by Annabeth with his arms full of tacos and an entire pineapple between his teeth.

A statue of Terminus exploded into being, right in front of Annabeth. He yelled at her in Latin, no doubt calling her a liar and a rule breaker; but she pushed the statue over and kept running.

Finally she spotted Percy. He and his friends, Hazel and Frank, were standing in the middle of a fountain as Percy repelled the angry Romans with blasts of water. Percy’s toga was in tatters, but he looked unhurt.

Annabeth called to him as another explosion rocked the forum. This time the flash of light was directly overhead. One of the Roman catapults had fired, and

the *Argo II* groaned and tilted sideways, flames bubbling over its bronze-plated hull.

Annabeth noticed a figure clinging desperately to the rope ladder, trying to climb down. It was Octavian, his robes steaming and his face black with soot.

Over by the fountain, Percy blasted the Roman mob with more water. Annabeth ran toward him, ducking a Roman fist and a flying plate of sandwiches.

“Annabeth!” Percy called. “What—?”

“I don’t know!” she yelled.

“I’ll tell you what!” cried a voice from above. Octavian had reached the bottom of the ladder. “The Greeks have *fired* on us! Your boy Leo has trained his weapons on Rome!”

Annabeth’s chest filled with liquid hydrogen. She felt like she might shatter into a million frozen pieces.

“You’re lying,” she said. “Leo would never—”

“I was just there!” Octavian shrieked. “I saw it with my own eyes!”

The *Argo II* returned fire. Legionnaires in the field scattered as one of their catapults was blasted to splinters.

“You see?” Octavian screamed. “Romans, kill the invaders!”

Annabeth growled in frustration. There was no time for anyone to figure out the truth. The crew from Camp Half-Blood was outnumbered a hundred to one, and

even if Octavian had managed to stage some sort of trick (which she thought likely), they'd never be able to convince the Romans before they were overrun and killed.

"We have to leave," she told Percy. "*Now.*"

He nodded grimly. "Hazel, Frank, you've got to make a choice. Are you coming?"

Hazel looked terrified, but she donned her cavalry helmet. "Of course we are. But you'll never make it to the ship unless we buy you some time."

"How?" Annabeth asked.

Hazel whistled. Instantly a blur of beige shot across the forum. A majestic horse materialized next to the fountain. He reared, whinnying and scattering the mob. Hazel climbed on his back like she'd been born to ride. Strapped to the horse's saddle was a Roman cavalry sword.

Hazel unsheathed her golden blade. "Send me an Iris-message when you're safely away, and we'll rendezvous," she said. "Arion, ride!"

The horse zipped through the crowd with incredible speed, pushing back Romans and causing mass panic.

Annabeth felt a glimmer of hope. Maybe they could make it out of here alive. Then, from halfway across the forum, she heard Jason shouting.

"Romans!" he cried. "Please!"

He and Piper were being pelted with plates and

stones. Jason tried to shield Piper, but a brick caught him above the eye. He crumpled, and the crowd surged forward.

“Get back!” Piper screamed. Her charmspeak rolled over the mob, making them hesitate, but Annabeth knew the effect wouldn’t last. Percy and she couldn’t possibly reach them in time to help.

“Frank,” Percy said, “it’s up to you. Can you help them?”

Annabeth didn’t understand how Frank could do that all by himself, but he swallowed nervously.

“Oh, gods,” he murmured. “Okay, sure. Just get up the ropes. Now.”

Percy and Annabeth lunged for the ladder. Octavian was still clinging to the bottom, but Percy yanked him off and threw him into the mob.

They began to climb as armed legionnaires flooded into the forum. Arrows whistled past Annabeth’s head. An explosion almost knocked her off the ladder. Halfway up, she heard a roar below and glanced down.

Romans screamed and scattered as a full-sized dragon charged through the forum—a beast even scarier than the bronze dragon figurehead on the *Argo II*. It had rough gray skin like a Komodo lizard’s and leathery bat wings. Arrows and rocks bounced harmlessly off its hide as it lumbered toward Piper and Jason, grabbed them with its front claws, and vaulted

into the air.

“Is that... ?” Annabeth couldn’t even put the thought into words.

“Frank,” Percy confirmed, a few feet above her. “He has a few special talents.”

“Understatement,” Annabeth muttered. “Keep climbing!”

Without the dragon and Hazel’s horse to distract the archers, they never would have made it up the ladder; but finally they climbed past a row of broken aerial oars and onto the deck. The rigging was on fire. The foresail was ripped down the middle, and the ship listed badly to starboard.

There was no sign of Coach Hedge, but Leo stood amidships, calmly reloading the ballista. Annabeth’s gut twisted with horror.

“Leo!” she screamed. “What are you *doing*?”

“Destroy them...” He faced Annabeth. His eyes were glazed. His movements were like a robot’s. “Destroy them all.”

He turned back to the ballista, but Percy tackled him. Leo’s head hit the deck hard, and his eyes rolled up so that only the whites showed.

The gray dragon soared into view. It circled the ship once and landed at the bow, depositing Jason and Piper, who both collapsed.

“Go!” Percy yelled. “Get us out of here!”

With a shock, Annabeth realized he was talking to her.

She ran for the helm. She made the mistake of glancing over the rail and saw armed legionnaires closing ranks in the forum, preparing flaming arrows. Hazel spurred Arion, and they raced out of the city with a mob chasing after them. More catapults were being wheeled into range. All along the Pomerian Line, the statues of Terminus were glowing purple, as if building up energy for some kind of attack.

Annabeth looked over the controls. She cursed Leo for making them so complicated. No time for fancy maneuvers, but she did know one basic command: *Up*.

She grabbed the aviation throttle and yanked it straight back. The ship groaned. The bow tilted up at a horrifying angle. The mooring lines snapped, and the *Argo II* shot into the clouds.

V

LEO

LEO WISHED HE COULD INVENT a time machine. He'd go back two hours and undo what had happened. Either that, or he could invent a Slap-Leo-in-the-Face machine to punish himself, though he doubted it would hurt as badly as the look Annabeth was giving him.

"One more time," she said. "Exactly *what* happened?"

Leo slumped against the mast. His head still throbbed from hitting the deck. All around him, his beautiful new ship was in shambles. The aft crossbows

were piles of kindling. The foresail was tattered. The satellite array that powered the onboard Internet and TV was blown to bits, which had really made Coach Hedge mad. Their bronze dragon figurehead, Festus, was coughing up smoke like he had a hairball, and Leo could tell from the groaning sounds on the port side that some of the aerial oars had been knocked out of alignment or broken off completely, which explained why the ship was listing and shuddering as it flew, the engine wheezing like an asthmatic steam train.

He choked back a sob. “I don’t know. It’s fuzzy.”

Too many people were looking at him: Annabeth (Leo *hated* to make her angry; that girl scared him), Coach Hedge with his furry goat legs, his orange polo shirt, and his baseball bat (did he have to carry that everywhere?), and the newcomer, Frank.

Leo wasn’t sure what to make of Frank. He looked like a baby sumo wrestler, though Leo wasn’t stupid enough to say that aloud. Leo’s memory was hazy, but while he’d been half conscious, he was pretty sure he’d seen a dragon land on the ship—a dragon that had turned into Frank.

Annabeth crossed her arms. “You mean you don’t remember?”

“I...” Leo felt like he was trying to swallow a marble. “I remember, but it’s like I was watching myself do things. I couldn’t control it.”

Coach Hedge tapped his bat against the deck. In his gym clothes, with his cap pulled over his horns, he looked just like he used to at the Wilderness School, where he'd spent a year undercover as Jason, Piper, and Leo's P.E. teacher. The way the old satyr was glowering, Leo almost wondered if the coach was going to order him to do push-ups.

"Look, kid," Hedge said, "you blew up some stuff. You attacked some Romans. Awesome! Excellent! But did you *have* to knock out the satellite channels? I was right in the middle of watching a cage match."

"Coach," Annabeth said, "why don't you make sure all the fires are out?"

"But I already did that."

"Do it again."

The satyr trudged off, muttering under his breath. Even Hedge wasn't crazy enough to defy Annabeth.

She knelt next to Leo. Her gray eyes were as steely as ball bearings. Her blond hair fell loose around her shoulders, but Leo didn't find that attractive. He had no idea where the stereotype of dumb giggly blondes came from. Ever since he'd met Annabeth at the Grand Canyon last winter, when she'd marched toward him with that *Give me Percy Jackson or I'll kill you* expression, Leo thought of blondes as much too smart and much too dangerous.

"Leo," she said calmly, "did Octavian trick you

somehow? Did he frame you, or—”

“No.” Leo could have lied and blamed that stupid Roman, but he didn’t want to make a bad situation worse. “The guy was a jerk, but he didn’t fire on the camp. I did.”

The new kid, Frank, scowled. “On purpose?”

“No!” Leo squeezed his eyes shut. “Well, yes...I mean, I didn’t want to. But at the same time, I *felt* like I wanted to. Something was making me do it. There was this cold feeling inside me—”

“A cold feeling.” Annabeth’s tone changed. She sounded almost... scared.

“Yeah,” Leo said. “Why?”

From belowdecks, Percy called up, “Annabeth, we need you.”

Oh, gods, Leo thought. Please let Jason be okay.

As soon as they’d gotten on board, Piper had taken Jason below. The cut on his head had looked pretty bad. Leo had known Jason longer than anyone at Camp Half-Blood. They were best friends. If Jason didn’t make it...

“He’ll be fine.” Annabeth’s expression softened. “Frank, I’ll be back. Just... watch Leo. Please.”

Frank nodded.

If it was possible for Leo to feel worse, he did. Annabeth now trusted a Roman demigod she’d known for like, three seconds, more than she trusted Leo.

Once she was gone, Leo and Frank stared at each other. The big dude looked pretty odd in his bedsheet toga, with his gray pullover hoodie and jeans, and a bow and quiver from the ship's armory slung over his shoulder. Leo remembered the time he had met the Hunters of Artemis—a bunch of cute lithe girls in silvery clothes, all armed with bows. He imagined Frank frolicking along with them. The idea was so ridiculous, it almost made him feel better.

“So,” Frank said. “Your name isn’t Sammy?”

Leo scowled. “What kind of question is that?”

“Nothing,” Frank said quickly. “I just— Nothing. About the firing on the camp... Octavian could be behind it, like magically or something. He didn’t want the Romans getting along with you guys.”

Leo wanted to believe that. He was grateful to this kid for not hating him. But he knew it hadn’t been Octavian. *Leo* had walked to a ballista and started firing. Part of him had known it was wrong. He’d asked himself: *What the heck am I doing?* But he’d done it anyway.

Maybe he was going crazy. The stress of all those months working on the *Argo II* might’ve finally made him crack.

But he couldn’t think about that. He needed to do something productive. His hands needed to be busy.

“Look,” he said, “I should talk to Festus and get a

damage report. You mind... ?”

Frank helped him up. “Who is Festus?”

“My friend,” Leo said. “His name isn’t Sammy either, in case you’re wondering. Come on. I’ll introduce you.”

Fortunately the bronze dragon wasn’t damaged. Well, aside from the fact that last winter he’d lost everything except his head—but Leo didn’t count that.

When they reached the bow of the ship, the figurehead turned a hundred and eighty degrees to look at them. Frank yelped and backed away.

“It’s alive!” he said.

Leo would have laughed if he hadn’t felt so bad. “Yeah. Frank, this is Festus. He used to be a full bronze dragon, but we had an accident.”

“You have a lot of accidents,” Frank noted.

“Well, some of us can’t turn into dragons, so we have to build our own.” Leo arched his eyebrows at Frank. “Anyway, I revived him as a figurehead. He’s kind of the ship’s main interface now. How are things looking, Festus?”

Festus snorted smoke and made a series of squeaking, whirring sounds. Over the last few months, Leo had learned to interpret this machine language. Other demigods could understand Latin and Greek. Leo could speak Creak and Squeak.

“Ugh,” Leo said. “Could be worse, but the hull is compromised in several places. The port aerial oars have to be fixed before we can go full speed again. We’ll need some repair materials: Celestial bronze, tar, lime—”

“What do you need limes for?”

“Dude, *lime*. Calcium carbonate, used in cement and a bunch of other— Ah, never mind. The point is, this ship isn’t going far unless we can fix it.”

Festus made another click-creak noise that Leo didn’t recognize. It sounded like *AY-zuhl*.

“Oh...*Hazel*,” he deciphered. “That’s the girl with the curly hair, right?”

Frank gulped. “Is she okay?”

“Yeah, she’s fine,” Leo said. “According to Festus, her horse is racing along below. She’s following us.”

“We’ve got to land, then,” Frank said.

Leo studied him. “She’s your girlfriend?”

Frank chewed his lip. “Yes.”

“You don’t sound sure.”

“Yes. Yes, definitely. I’m sure.”

Leo raised his hands. “Okay, fine. The problem is we can only manage one landing. The way the hull and the oars are, we won’t be able to lift off again until we repair, so we’ll have to make sure we land somewhere with all the right supplies.”

Frank scratched his head. “Where do you get

Celestial bronze? You can't just stock up at Home Depot."

"Festus, do a scan."

"He can scan for magic bronze?" Frank marveled. "Is there anything he *can't* do?"

Leo thought: *You should've seen him when he had a body*. But he didn't say that. It was too painful, remembering the way Festus used to be.

Leo peered over the ship's bow. The Central California valley was passing below. Leo didn't hold out much hope that they could find what they needed all in one place, but they had to try. Leo also wanted to put as much distance as possible between himself and New Rome. The *Argo II* could cover vast distances pretty quickly, thanks to its magical engine, but Leo figured the Romans had magic travel methods of their own.

Behind him, the stairs creaked. Percy and Annabeth climbed up, their faces grim.

Leo's heart stumbled. "Is Jason—?"

"He's resting," Annabeth said. "Piper's keeping an eye on him, but he should be fine."

Percy gave him a hard look. "Annabeth says you *did* fire the ballista?"

"Man, I—I don't understand how it happened. I'm so sorry—"

"*Sorry?*" Percy growled.

Annabeth put a hand on her boyfriend's chest. "We'll figure it out later. Right now, we have to regroup and make a plan. What's the situation with the ship?"

Leo's legs trembled. The way Percy had looked at him made him feel the same as when Jason summoned lightning. Leo's skin tingled, and every instinct in his body screamed, *Duck!*

He told Annabeth about the damage and the supplies they needed. At least he felt better talking about something fixable.

He was bemoaning the shortage of Celestial bronze when Festus began to whirl and squeak.

"Perfect." Leo sighed with relief.

"What's perfect?" Annabeth said. "I could use some *perfect* about now."

Leo managed a smile. "Everything we need in one place. Frank, why don't you turn into a bird or something? Fly down and tell your girlfriend to meet us at the Great Salt Lake in Utah."

Once they got there, it wasn't a pretty landing. With the oars damaged and the foresail torn, Leo could barely manage a controlled descent. The others strapped themselves in below—except for Coach Hedge, who insisted on clinging to the forward rail, yelling, "YEAH! Bring it on, lake!" Leo stood astern, alone at

the helm, and aimed as best he could.

Festus creaked and whirred warning signals, which were relayed through the intercom to the quarterdeck.

“I know, I know,” Leo said, gritting his teeth.

He didn’t have much time to take in the scenery. To the southeast, a city was nestled in the foothills of a mountain range, blue and purple in the afternoon shadows. A flat desert landscape spread to the south. Directly beneath them the Great Salt Lake glittered like aluminum foil, the shoreline etched with white salt marshes that reminded Leo of aerial photos of Mars.

“Hang on, Coach!” he shouted. “This is going to hurt.”

“I was *born* for hurt!”

WHOOM! A swell of salt water washed over the bow, dousing Coach Hedge. The *Argo II* listed dangerously to starboard, then righted itself and rocked on the surface of the lake. Machinery hummed as the aerial blades that were still working changed to nautical form.

Three banks of robotic oars dipped into the water and began moving them forward.

“Good job, Festus,” Leo said. “Take us toward the south shore.”

“Yeah!” Coach Hedge pumped his fists in the air. He was drenched from his horns to hooves, but grinning like a crazy goat. “Do it again!”

“Uh...maybe later,” Leo said. “Just stay above deck, okay? You can keep watch, in case—you know, the lake decides to attack us or something.”

“On it,” Hedge promised.

Leo rang the *All clear* bell and headed for the stairs. Before he got there, a loud *clump-clump-clump* shook the hull. A tan stallion appeared on deck with Hazel Levesque on his back.

“How—?” Leo’s question died in his throat. “We’re in the middle of a lake! Can that thing fly?”

The horse whinnied angrily.

“Arion can’t fly,” Hazel said. “But he can run across just about anything. Water, vertical surfaces, small mountains—none of that bothers him.”

“Oh.”

Hazel was looking at him strangely, the way she had during the feast in the forum—like she was searching for something in his face. He was tempted to ask if they had met before, but he was sure they hadn’t. He would remember a pretty girl paying such close attention to him. That didn’t happen a lot.

She’s Frank’s girlfriend, he reminded himself.

Frank was still below, but Leo almost wished the big guy would come up the stairs. The way Hazel was studying Leo made him feel uneasy and self-conscious.

Coach Hedge crept forward with his baseball bat, eyeing the magic horse suspiciously. “Valdez, does this

count as an invasion?”

“No!” Leo said. “Um, Hazel, you’d better come with me. I built a stable belowdecks, if Arion wants to —”

“He’s more of a free spirit.” Hazel slipped out of the saddle. “He’ll graze around the lake until I call him. But I want to see the ship. Lead the way.”

The *Argo II* was designed like an ancient trireme, only twice as big. The first deck had one central corridor with crew cabins on either side. On a normal trireme, most of the space would’ve been taken up with three rows of benches for a few hundred sweaty guys to do the manual labor, but Leo’s oars were automated and retractable, so they took up very little room inside the hull. The ship’s power came from the engine room on the second and lowest deck, which also housed sickbay, storage, and the stables.

Leo led the way down the hall. He’d built the ship with eight cabins—seven for the demigods of the prophecy, and a room for Coach Hedge (Seriously—Chiron considered him a responsible adult chaperone?). At the stern was a large mess hall/lounge, which was where Leo headed.

On the way, they passed Jason’s room. The door was open. Piper sat at the side of his berth, holding Jason’s hand while he snored with an ice pack on his head.

Piper glanced at Leo. She held a finger to her lips for quiet, but she didn't look angry. That was something. Leo tried to force down his guilt, and they kept walking. When they reached the mess hall, they found the others—Percy, Annabeth, and Frank—sitting dejectedly around the dining table.

Leo had made the lounge as nice as possible, since he figured they'd be spending a lot of time there. The cupboard was lined with magic cups and plates from Camp Half-Blood, which would fill up with whatever food or drink you wanted on command. There was also a magical ice chest with canned drinks, perfect for picnics ashore. The chairs were cushy recliners with thousand-finger massage, built-in headphones, and sword and drink holders for all your demigod kicking-back needs. There were no windows, but the walls were enchanted to show real-time footage from Camp Half-Blood—the beach, the forest, the strawberry fields—although now Leo was wondering if this made people homesick rather than happy.

Percy was staring longingly at a sunset view of Half-Blood Hill, where the Golden Fleece glittered in the branches of the tall pine tree.

“So we've landed,” Percy said. “What now?”

Frank plucked on his bowstring. “Figure out the prophecy? I mean...that *was* a prophecy Ella spoke, right? From the Sibylline Books?”

“The what?” Leo asked.

Frank explained how their harpy friend was freakishly good at memorizing books. At some point in the past, she’d inhaled a collection of ancient prophecies that had supposedly been destroyed around the fall of Rome.

“That’s why you didn’t tell the Romans,” Leo guessed. “You didn’t want them to get hold of her.”

Percy kept staring at the image of Half-Blood Hill. “Ella’s sensitive. She was a captive when we found her. I just didn’t want...” He made a fist. “It doesn’t matter now. I sent Tyson an Iris-message, told him to take Ella to Camp Half-Blood. They’ll be safe there.”

Leo doubted that *any* of them would be safe, now that he had stirred up a camp of angry Romans on top of the problems they already had with Gaea and the giants; but he kept quiet.

Annabeth laced her fingers. “Let me think about the prophecy—but right now we have more immediate problems. We have to get this ship fixed. Leo, what do we need?”

“The easiest thing is tar.” Leo was glad to change the subject. “We can get that in the city, at a roofing-supply store or someplace like that. Also, Celestial bronze and lime. According to Festus, we can find both of those on an island in the lake, just west of here.”

“We’ll have to hurry,” Hazel warned. “If I know

Octavian, he's searching for us with his auguries. The Romans will send a strike force after us. It's a matter of honor."

Leo felt everyone's eyes on him. "Guys...I don't know what happened. Honestly, I—"

Annabeth raised her hand. "We've been talking. We agree it couldn't have been *you*, Leo. That cold feeling you mentioned...I felt it too. It must have been some sort of magic, either Octavian or Gaea or one of her minions. But until we understand what happened —"

Frank grunted. "How can we be sure it won't happen again?"

Leo's fingers heated up like they were about to catch fire. One of his powers as a son of Hephaestus was that he could summon flames at will; but he had to be careful not to do so by accident, especially on a ship filled with explosives and flammable supplies.

"I'm fine now," he insisted, though he wished he could be sure. "Maybe we should use the buddy system. Nobody goes anywhere alone. We can leave Piper and Coach Hedge on board with Jason. Send one team into town to get tar. Another team can go after the bronze and the lime."

"Split up?" Percy said. "That sounds like a really bad idea."

"It'll be quicker," Hazel put in. "Besides, there's a

reason a quest is usually limited to three demigods, right?”

Annabeth raised her eyebrows, as if reappraising Hazel’s merits. “You’re right. The same reason we needed the *Argo II*...outside camp, seven demigods in one place will attract way too much monstrous attention. The ship is designed to conceal and protect us. We should be safe enough on board; but if we go on expeditions, we shouldn’t travel in groups larger than three. No sense alerting more of Gaea’s minions than we have to.”

Percy still didn’t look happy about it, but he took Annabeth’s hand. “As long as you’re my buddy, I’m good.”

Hazel smiled. “Oh, that’s easy. Frank, you were amazing, turning into a dragon! Could you do it again to fly Annabeth and Percy into town for the tar?”

Frank opened his mouth like he wanted to protest. “I...I suppose. But what about you?”

“I’ll ride Arion with Sa—with Leo, here.” She fidgeted with her sword hilt, which made Leo uneasy. She had even more nervous energy than *he* did. “We’ll get the bronze and the lime. We can all meet back here by dark.”

Frank scowled. Obviously, he didn’t like the idea of Leo going off with Hazel. For some reason, Frank’s disapproval made Leo want to go. He *had* to prove he

was trustworthy. He wasn't going to fire any random ballistae again.

"Leo," said Annabeth, "if we get the supplies, how long to fix the ship?"

"With luck, just a few hours."

"Fine," she decided. "We'll meet you back here as soon as possible, but stay safe. We could use some good luck. That doesn't mean we'll get it."

VI

LEO

RIDING ARION WAS THE BEST THING that had happened to Leo all day—which wasn't saying much, since his day had sucked. The horse's hooves turned the surface of the lake to salty mist. Leo put his hand against the horse's side and felt the muscles working like a well-oiled machine. For the first time, he understood why car engines were measured in horsepower. Arion was a four-legged Maserati.

Ahead of them lay an island—a line of sand so white, it might have been pure table salt. Behind that

rose an expanse of grassy dunes and weathered boulders.

Leo sat behind Hazel, one arm around her waist. The close contact made him a little uncomfortable, but it was the only way he could stay on board (or whatever you called it with a horse).

Before they left, Percy had pulled him aside to tell him Hazel's story. Percy made it sound like he was just doing Leo a favor, but there'd been an undertone like *If you mess with my friend, I will personally feed you to a great white shark.*

According to Percy, Hazel was a daughter of Pluto. She'd died in the 1940s and been brought back to life only a few months ago.

Leo found that hard to believe. Hazel seemed warm and very alive, not like the ghosts or the other reborn mortals Leo had tangled with.

She seemed good with people, too, unlike Leo, who was much more comfortable with machines. Living stuff, like horses and girls? He had no idea what made them work.

Hazel was also Frank's girlfriend, so Leo knew he should keep his distance. Still, her hair smelled good, and riding with her made his heart race almost against his will. It must've been the speed of the horse.

Arion thundered onto the beach. He stomped his hooves and whinnied triumphantly, like Coach Hedge

yelling a battle cry.

Hazel and Leo dismounted. Arion pawed the sand.

“He needs to eat,” Hazel explained. “He likes gold, but—”

“Gold?” Leo asked.

“He’ll settle for grass. Go on, Arion. Thanks for the ride. I’ll call you.”

Just like that, the horse was gone—nothing left but a steaming trail across the lake.

“Fast horse,” Leo said, “and expensive to feed.”

“Not really,” Hazel said. “Gold is easy for me.”

Leo raised his eyebrows. “How is gold easy? Please tell me you’re not related to King Midas. I don’t like that guy.”

Hazel pursed her lips, as if she regretted raising the subject. “Never mind.”

That made Leo even more curious, but he decided it might be better not to press her. He knelt and cupped a handful of white sand. “Well...one problem solved, anyway. This is lime.”

Hazel frowned. “The whole beach?”

“Yeah. See? The granules are perfectly round. It’s not really sand. It’s calcium carbonate.” Leo pulled a Ziploc bag from his tool belt and dug his hand into the lime.

Suddenly he froze. He remembered all the times the earth goddess Gaea had appeared to him in the ground

—her sleeping face made of dust or sand or dirt. She loved to taunt him. He imagined her closed eyes and her dreaming smile swirling in the white calcium.

Walk away, little hero, Gaea said. *Without you, the ship cannot be fixed.*

“Leo?” Hazel asked. “You okay?”

He took a shaky breath. Gaea wasn’t here. He was just freaking himself out.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, fine.”

He started to fill the bag.

Hazel knelt next to him and helped. “We should’ve brought a pail and shovels.”

The idea cheered Leo up. He even smiled. “We could’ve made a sand castle.”

“A lime castle.”

Their eyes locked for a second too long.

Hazel looked away. “You are *so* much like—”

“Sammy?” Leo guessed.

She fell backward. “You know?”

“I have no idea who Sammy is. But Frank asked me if I was sure that wasn’t my name.”

“And... it isn’t?”

“No! Jeez.”

“You don’t have a twin brother or...” Hazel stopped. “Is your family from New Orleans?”

“Nah. Houston. Why? Is Sammy a guy you used to know?”

“I... It’s nothing. You just look like him.”

Leo could tell she was too embarrassed to say more. But if Hazel was a kid from the past, did that mean Sammy was from the 1940s? If so, how could Frank know the guy? And why would Hazel think Leo was Sammy, all these decades later?

They finished filling the bag in silence. Leo stuffed it in his tool belt and the bag vanished—no weight, no mass, no volume—though Leo knew it would be there as soon as he reached for it. Anything that could fit into the pockets, Leo could tote around. He *loved* his tool belt. He just wished the pockets were large enough for a chain saw, or maybe a bazooka.

He stood and scanned the island—bleach-white dunes, blankets of grass, and boulders encrusted with salt like frosting. “Festus said there was Celestial bronze close by, but I’m not sure where—”

“That way.” Hazel pointed up the beach. “About five hundred yards.”

“How do you—?”

“Precious metals,” Hazel said. “It’s a Pluto thing.”

Leo remembered what she’d said about gold being easy. “Handy talent. Lead the way, Miss Metal Detector.”

The sun began to set. The sky turned a bizarre mix of purple and yellow. In another reality, Leo might’ve

enjoyed a walk on the beach with a pretty girl, but the farther they went, the edgier he felt. Finally Hazel turned inland.

“You sure this is a good idea?” he asked.

“We’re close,” she promised. “Come on.”

Just over the dunes, they saw the woman.

She sat on a boulder in the middle of a grassy field. A black-and-chrome motorcycle was parked nearby, but each of the wheels had a big pie slice removed from the spokes and rim, so that they resembled Pac-Men. No way was the bike drivable in that condition.

The woman had curly black hair and a bony frame. She wore black leather biker’s pants, tall leather boots, and a bloodred leather jacket—sort of a *Michael Jackson joins the Hell’s Angels* look. Around her feet, the ground was littered with what looked like broken shells. She was hunched over, pulling new ones out of a sack and cracking them open. Shucking oysters? Leo wasn’t sure if there were oysters in the Great Salt Lake. He didn’t think so.

He wasn’t anxious to approach. He’d had bad experiences with strange ladies. His old babysitter, Tia Callida, had turned out to be Hera and had a nasty habit of putting him down for naps in a blazing fireplace. The earth goddess Gaea had killed his mother in a workshop fire when Leo was eight. The snow goddess Khione had tried to turn him into a frozen dairy treat in

Sonoma.

But Hazel forged ahead, so he didn't have much choice except to follow.

As they got closer, Leo noticed disturbing details. Attached to the woman's belt was a curled whip. Her red-leather jacket had a subtle design to it—twisted branches of an apple tree populated with skeletal birds. The oysters she was shucking were actually fortune cookies.

A pile of broken cookies lay ankle-deep all around her. She kept pulling new ones from her sack, cracking them open, and reading the fortunes. Most she tossed aside. A few made her mutter unhappily. She would swipe her finger over the slip of paper like she was smudging it, then magically reseal the cookie and toss it into a nearby basket.

"What are you doing?" Leo asked before he could stop himself.

The woman looked up. Leo's lungs filled so fast, he thought they might burst.

"Aunt Rosa?" he asked.

It didn't make sense, but this woman looked *exactly* like his aunt. She had the same broad nose with a mole on one side, the same sour mouth and hard eyes. But it couldn't be Rosa. She would never wear clothes like that, and she was still down in Houston, as far as Leo knew. She wouldn't be cracking open fortune cookies

in the middle of the Great Salt Lake.

“Is that what you see?” the woman asked.
“Interesting. And you, Hazel, dear?”

“How did you—?” Hazel stepped back in alarm.
“You—you look like Mrs. Leer. My third grade teacher. I hated you.”

The woman cackled. “Excellent. You resented her, eh? She judged you unfairly?”

“You—she taped my hands to the desk for misbehaving,” Hazel said. “She called my mother a witch. She blamed me for everything I didn’t do and—No. She *has* to be dead. Who *are* you?”

“Oh, Leo knows,” the woman said. “How do you feel about Aunt Rosa, *mijo*?”

Mijo. That’s what Leo’s mom had always called him. After his mom died, Rosa had rejected Leo. She’d called him a devil child. She’d blamed him for the fire that had killed her sister. Rosa had turned his family against him and left him—a scrawny orphaned eight-year-old—at the mercy of social services. Leo had bounced around from foster home to foster home until he’d finally found a home at Camp Half-Blood. Leo didn’t hate many people, but after all these years, Aunt Rosa’s face made him boil with resentment.

How did he feel? He wanted to get even. He wanted revenge.

His eyes drifted to the motorcycle with the Pac-

Man wheels. Where had he seen something like that before? Cabin 16, back at Camp Half-Blood—the symbol above their door was a broken wheel.

“Nemesis,” he said. “You’re the goddess of revenge.”

“You see?” The goddess smiled at Hazel. “He recognizes me.”

Nemesis cracked another cookie and wrinkled her nose. “*You will have great fortune when you least expect it,*” she read. “That’s exactly the sort of nonsense I hate. Someone opens a cookie, and suddenly they have a prophecy that they’ll be rich! I blame that tramp Tyche. Always dispensing good luck to people who don’t deserve it!”

Leo looked at the mound of broken cookies. “Uh... you know those aren’t real prophecies, right? They’re just stuffed in the cookies at some factory—”

“Don’t try to excuse it!” Nemesis snapped. “It’s just like Tyche to get people’s hopes up. No, no. I *must* counter her.” Nemesis flicked a finger over the slip of paper, and the letters changed to red. “*You will die painfully when you most expect it.* There! Much better.”

“That’s horrible!” Hazel said. “You’d let someone read that in their fortune cookie, and it would come true?”

Nemesis sneered. It really was creepy, seeing that expression on Aunt Rosa’s face. “My dear Hazel,

haven't you ever wished horrible things on Mrs. Leer for the way she treated you?"

"That doesn't mean I'd want them to come true!"

"Bah." The goddess resealed the cookie and tossed it in her basket. "Tyche would be Fortuna for you, I suppose, being Roman. Like the others, she's in a horrible way right now. Me? I'm not affected. I am called Nemesis in both Greek and Roman. I do not change, because revenge is universal."

"What are you talking about?" Leo asked. "What are you doing here?"

Nemesis opened another cookie. "Lucky numbers. Ridiculous! That's not even a proper fortune!" She crushed the cookie and scattered the pieces around her feet.

"To answer your question, Leo Valdez, the gods are in terrible shape. It always happens when a civil war is brewing between you Romans and Greeks. The Olympians are torn between their two natures, called on by both sides. They become quite schizophrenic, I'm afraid. Splitting headaches. Disorientation."

"But we're not at war," Leo insisted.

"Um, Leo..." Hazel winced. "Except for the fact that you recently blew up large sections of New Rome."

Leo stared at her, wondering whose side she was on. "Not on purpose!"

"I know..." Hazel said, "but the Romans don't

realize that. And they'll be pursuing us in retaliation."

Nemesis cackled. "Leo, listen to the girl. War is coming. Gaea has seen to it, with your help. And can you guess whom the gods blame for their predicament?"

Leo's mouth tasted like calcium carbonate. "Me."

The goddess snorted. "Well, don't *you* have a high opinion of yourself. You're just a pawn on the chessboard, Leo Valdez. I was referring to the player who set this ridiculous quest in motion, bringing the Greeks and Romans together. The gods blame Hera—or Juno, if you prefer! The queen of the heavens has fled Olympus to escape the wrath of her family. Don't expect any more help from your patron!"

Leo's head throbbed. He had mixed feelings about Hera. She'd meddled in his life since he was a baby, molding him to serve her purpose in this big prophecy, but at least she had been on their side, more or less. If she was out of the picture now...

"So why are you here?" he asked.

"Why, to offer *my* help!" Nemesis smiled wickedly.

Leo glanced at Hazel. She looked like she'd just been offered a free snake.

"Your help," Leo said.

"Of course!" said the goddess. "I enjoy tearing down the proud and powerful, and there are none who deserve tearing down like Gaea and her giants. Still, I

must warn you that I will not suffer undeserved success. Good luck is a sham. The wheel of fortune is a Ponzi scheme. True success requires sacrifice.”

“Sacrifice?” Hazel’s voice was tight. “I lost my mother. I died and came back. Now my brother is missing. Isn’t that enough sacrifice for you?”

Leo could totally relate. He wanted to scream that he’d lost his mom too. His whole life had been one misery after another. He’d lost his dragon, Festus. He’d nearly killed himself trying to finish the *Argo II*. Now he’d fired on the Roman camp, most likely started a war, and maybe lost the trust of his friends.

“Right now,” he said, trying to control his anger, “all I want is some Celestial bronze.”

“Oh, that’s easy,” Nemesis said. “It’s just over the rise. You’ll find it with the sweethearts.”

“Wait,” Hazel said. “What sweethearts?”

Nemesis popped a cookie in her mouth and swallowed it, fortune and all. “You’ll see. Perhaps they will teach you a lesson, Hazel Levesque. Most heroes cannot escape their nature, even when given a second chance at life.” She smiled. “And speaking of your brother Nico, you don’t have much time. Let’s see... it’s June twenty-fifth? Yes, after today, six more days. Then he dies, along with the entire city of Rome.”

Hazel’s eyes widened. “How... what—?”

“And as for *you*, child of fire.” She turned to Leo.

“Your worst hardships are yet to come. You will always be the outsider, the seventh wheel. You will not find a place among your brethren. Soon you will face a problem you cannot solve, though I could help you... for a price.”

Leo smelled smoke. He realized fingers on his left hand were ablaze, and Hazel was staring at him in terror.

He shoved his hand in his pocket to extinguish the flames. “I like to solve my own problems.”

“Very well.” Nemesis brushed cookie dust off her jacket.

“But, um, what sort of price are we talking about?”

The goddess shrugged. “One of my children recently traded an eye for the ability to make a real difference in the world.”

Leo’s stomach churned. “You... want an eye?”

“In your case, perhaps another sacrifice would do. But something just as painful. Here.” She handed him an unbroken fortune cookie. “If you need an answer, break this. It will solve your problem.”

Leo’s hand trembled as he held the fortune cookie. “What problem?”

“You’ll know when the time comes.”

“No, thanks,” Leo said firmly. But his hand, as though it had a will of its own, slipped the cookie into his tool belt.

Nemesis picked another cookie from her bag and cracked it open. “*You will have cause to reconsider your choices soon.* Oh, I like that one. No changes needed here.”

She resealed the cookie and tossed it into the basket. “Very few gods will be able to help you on the quest. Most are already incapacitated, and their confusion will only grow worse. One thing might bring unity to Olympus again—an old wrong finally avenged. Ah, that would be sweet indeed, the scales finally balanced! But it will not happen unless you accept my help.”

“I suppose you won’t tell us what you’re talking about,” Hazel muttered. “Or why my brother Nico has only six days to live. Or why Rome is going to be destroyed.”

Nemesis chuckled. She rose and slung her sack of cookies over her shoulder. “Oh, it’s all tied together, Hazel Levesque. As for my offer, Leo Valdez, give it some thought. You’re a good child. A hard worker. We could do business. But I have detained you too long. You should visit the reflecting pool before the light fades. My poor cursed boy gets quite...agitated when the darkness comes.”

Leo didn’t like the sound of that, but the goddess climbed on her motorcycle. Apparently, it *was* drivable, despite those Pac-Man-shaped wheels, because

Nemesis revved her engine and disappeared in a mushroom cloud of black smoke.

Hazel bent down. All the broken cookies and fortunes had disappeared except for one crumpled slip of paper. She picked it up and read, *"You will see yourself reflected, and you will have reason to despair."*

"Fantastic," Leo grumbled. "Let's go see what that means."

V I I

LEO

“WHO IS AUNT ROSA?” HAZEL ASKED.

Leo didn't want to talk about her. Nemesis's words were still buzzing in his ears. His tool belt seemed heavier since he'd put the cookie in there—which was impossible. Its pockets could carry anything without adding extra weight. Even the most fragile things would never break. Still, Leo imagined he could feel it in there, dragging him down, waiting to be cracked open.

“Long story,” he said. “She abandoned me after my

mom died, gave me to foster care.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well...” Leo was anxious to change the subject. “What about you? What Nemesis said about your brother?”

Hazel blinked like she’d gotten salt in her eyes. “Nico...he found me in the Underworld. He brought me back to the mortal world and convinced the Romans at Camp Jupiter to accept me. I owe him for my second chance at life. If Nemesis is right, and Nico’s in danger... I *have* to help him.”

“Sure,” Leo said, though the idea made him uneasy. He doubted the revenge goddess ever gave advice out of the goodness of her heart. “And what Nemesis said about your brother having six days to live, and Rome getting destroyed...any idea what she meant?”

“None,” Hazel admitted. “But I’m afraid...”

Whatever she was thinking, she decided not to share it. She climbed one of the largest boulders to get a better view. Leo tried to follow and lost his balance. Hazel caught his hand. She pulled him up and they found themselves atop the rock, holding hands, face-to-face.

Hazel’s eyes glittered like gold.

Gold is easy, she’d said. It didn’t seem that way to Leo—not when he looked at her. He wondered who Sammy was. Leo had a nagging suspicion that he

should know, but he just couldn't place the name. Whoever he was, he was lucky if Hazel cared for him.

"Um, thanks." He let go of her hand, but they were still standing so close, he could feel the warmth of her breath. She *definitely* didn't seem like a dead person.

"When we were talking to Nemesis," Hazel said uneasily, "your hands... I saw flames."

"Yeah," he said. "It's a Hephaestus power. Usually I can keep it under control."

"Oh." She put one hand protectively on her denim shirt, like she was about to say the Pledge of Allegiance. Leo got the feeling she wanted to back away from him, but the boulder was too small.

Great, he thought. Another person who thinks I'm a scary freak.

He gazed across the island. The opposite shore was only a few hundred yards away. Between here and there were dunes and clumps of boulders, but nothing that looked like a reflecting pool.

You will always be the outsider, Nemesis had told him, the seventh wheel. You will not find a place among your brethren.

She might as well have poured acid in his ears. Leo didn't need anybody to tell him he was odd man out. He'd spent months alone in Bunker 9 at Camp Half-Blood, working on his ship while his friends trained together and shared meals and played capture-the-flag

for fun and prizes. Even his two best friends, Piper and Jason, often treated him like an outsider. Since they'd started dating, their idea of "quality time" didn't include Leo. His only other friend, Festus the dragon, had been reduced to a figurehead when his control disk had gotten destroyed on their last adventure. Leo didn't have the technical skill to repair it.

The seventh wheel. Leo had heard of a fifth wheel—an extra, useless piece of equipment. He figured a seventh wheel was worse.

He'd thought maybe this quest would be a fresh start for him. All his hard work on the *Argo II* would pay off. He'd have six good friends who would admire and appreciate him, and they'd go sailing off into the sunrise to fight giants. Maybe, Leo secretly hoped, he'd even find a girlfriend.

Do the math, he chided himself.

Nemesis was right. He might be part of a group of seven, but he was still isolated. He had fired on the Romans and brought his friends nothing but trouble. *You will not find a place among your brethren.*

"Leo?" Hazel asked gently. "You can't take what Nemesis said to heart."

He frowned. "What if it's true?"

"She's the goddess of revenge," Hazel reminded him. "Maybe she's on our side, maybe not; but she exists to stir up resentment."

Leo wished he could dismiss his feelings that easily. He couldn't. Still, it wasn't Hazel's fault.

"We should keep going," he said. "I wonder what Nemesis meant about finishing before dark."

Hazel glanced at the sun, which was just touching the horizon. "And who is the *cursed boy* she mentioned?"

Below them, a voice said, "Cursed boy she mentioned."

At first, Leo saw no one. Then his eyes adjusted. He realized a young woman was standing only ten feet from the base of the boulder. Her dress was a Greek-style tunic the same color as the rocks. Her wispy hair was somewhere between brown and blond and gray, so it blended with the dry grass. She wasn't invisible, exactly, but she was almost perfectly camouflaged until she moved. Even then, Leo had trouble focusing on her. Her face was pretty but not memorable. In fact, each time Leo blinked, he couldn't remember what she looked like, and he had to concentrate to find her again.

"Hello," Hazel said. "Who are you?"

"Who are you?" the girl answered. Her voice sounded weary, like she was tired of answering that question.

Hazel and Leo exchanged looks. With this demigod gig, you never knew what you'd run into. Nine times out of ten, it wasn't good. A ninja girl camouflaged in

earth tones didn't strike Leo as something he wanted to deal with just then.

"Are you the cursed kid Nemesis mentioned?" Leo asked. "But you're a girl."

"You're a girl," said the girl.

"Excuse me?" Leo said.

"Excuse me," the girl said miserably.

"You're repeating..." Leo stopped. "Oh. Hold it. Hazel, wasn't there some myth about a girl who repeated everything—?"

"Echo," Hazel said.

"Echo," the girl agreed. She shifted, her dress changing with the landscape. Her eyes were the color of the salt water. Leo tried to home in on her features, but he couldn't.

"I don't remember the myth," he admitted. "You were cursed to repeat the last thing you heard?"

"You heard," Echo said.

"Poor thing," Hazel said. "If I remember right, a goddess did this?"

"A goddess did this," Echo confirmed.

Leo scratched his head. "But wasn't that thousands of years...oh. You're one of the mortals who came back through the Doors of Death. I really wish we could stop running into dead people."

"Dead people," Echo said, like she was chastising him.

He realized Hazel was staring at her feet.

“Uh... sorry,” he muttered. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

“That way.” Echo pointed toward the far shore of the island.

“You want to show us something?” Hazel asked. She climbed down the boulder, and Leo followed.

Even up close, Echo was hard to see. In fact, she seemed to get more invisible the longer he looked at her.

“You sure you’re real?” he asked. “I mean... flesh and blood?”

“Flesh and blood.” She touched Leo’s face and made him flinch. Her fingers were warm.

“So... you have to repeat everything?” he asked.

“Everything.”

Leo couldn’t help smiling. “That could be fun.”

“Fun,” she said unhappily.

“Blue elephants.”

“Blue elephants.”

“Kiss me, you fool.”

“You fool.”

“Hey!”

“Hey!”

“Leo,” Hazel pleaded, “don’t tease her.”

“Don’t tease her,” Echo agreed.

“Okay, okay,” Leo said, though he had to resist the

urge. It wasn't every day he met somebody with a built-in talkback feature. "So what were you pointing at? Do you need our help?"

"Help," Echo agreed emphatically. She gestured for them to follow and sprinted down the slope. Leo could only follow her progress by the movement of the grass and the shimmer of her dress as it changed to match the rocks.

"We'd better hurry," Hazel said. "Or we'll lose her."

They found the problem—if you can call a mob of good-looking girls a problem. Echo led them down into a grassy meadow shaped like a blast crater, with a small pond in the middle. Gathered at the water's edge were several dozen nymphs. At least, Leo guessed they were nymphs. Like the ones at Camp Half-Blood, these wore gossamer dresses. Their feet were bare. They had elfish features, and their skin had a slightly greenish tinge.

Leo didn't understand what they were doing, but they were all crowded together in one spot, facing the pond and jostling for a better view. Several held up phone cameras, trying to get a shot over the heads of the others. Leo had never seen nymphs with phones. He wondered if they were looking at a dead body. If so, why were they bouncing up and down and giggling so excitedly?

“What are they looking at?” Leo wondered.

“Looking at,” Echo sighed.

“One way to find out.” Hazel marched forward and began nudging her way through the crowd. “Excuse us. Pardon me.”

“Hey!” one nymph complained. “We were here first!”

“Yeah,” another sniffed. “He won’t be interested in *you*.”

The second nymph had large red hearts painted on her cheeks. Over her dress, she wore a T-shirt that read: OMG, I <3 N!!!!

“Uh, demigod business,” Leo said, trying to sound official. “Make room. Thanks.”

The nymphs grumbled, but they parted to reveal a young man kneeling at the edge of the pond, gazing intently at the water.

Leo usually didn’t pay much attention to how other guys looked. He supposed that came from hanging around Jason—tall, blond, rugged, and basically everything Leo could never be. Leo was used to not being noticed by girls. At least, he knew he’d never get a girl by his looks. He hoped his personality and sense of humor would do that someday, though it definitely hadn’t worked yet.

At any rate, Leo couldn’t miss the fact that the guy at the pond was one super good-looking dude. He had a chiseled face with lips and eyes that were somewhere

between feminine beautiful and masculine handsome. Dark hair swept over his brow. He might've been seventeen or twenty, it was hard to say, but he was built like a dancer—with long graceful arms and muscular legs, perfect posture and an air of regal calm. He wore a simple white T-shirt and jeans, with a bow and quiver strapped to his back. The weapons obviously hadn't been used in a while. The arrows were covered in dust. A spider had woven a web in the top of the bow.

As Leo edged closer, he realized the guy's face was unusually golden. In the sunset, the light was bouncing off a large flat sheet of Celestial bronze that lay at the bottom of the pond, washing Mr. Handsome's features in a warm glow.

The guy seemed fascinated with his reflection in the metal.

Hazel inhaled sharply. "He's gorgeous."

Around her, the nymphs squealed and clapped in agreement.

"I am," the young man murmured dreamily, his gaze still fixed on the water. "I am *so* gorgeous."

One of the nymphs showed her iPhone screen. "His latest YouTube video got a million hits in like, an *hour*. I think I was half of those!"

The other nymphs giggled.

"YouTube video?" Leo asked. "What does he do in the video, sing?"

“No, silly!” the nymph chided. “He used to be a prince, and a wonderful hunter and stuff. But that doesn’t matter. Now he just... well, look!” She showed Leo the video. It was exactly what they were seeing in real life—the guy staring at himself in the pond.

“He is sooooo hot!” said another girl. Her T-shirt read: MRS. NARCISSUS.

“Narcissus?” Leo asked.

“Narcissus,” Echo agreed sadly.

Leo had forgotten Echo was there. Apparently none of the nymphs had noticed her either.

“Oh, not *you* again!” Mrs. Narcissus tried to push Echo away, but she misjudged where the camouflaged girl was and ended up shoving several other nymphs.

“You had your chance, Echo!” said the nymph with the iPhone. “He dumped you four thousand years ago! You are *so* not good enough for him.”

“For him,” Echo said bitterly.

“Wait.” Hazel clearly had trouble tearing her eyes away from the handsome guy, but she managed it. “What’s going on here? Why did Echo bring us here?”

One nymph rolled her eyes. She was holding an autograph pen and a crumpled poster of Narcissus. “Echo was a nymph like us, a long time ago, but she was a total chatterbox! Gossiping, blah, blah, blah, all the time.”

“I know!” another nymph shrieked. “Like, who

could stand that? Just the other day, I told Cleopeia—you know she lives in the boulder next to me?—I said: *Stop gossiping or you'll end up like Echo*. Cleopeia is such a big mouth! Did you hear what she said about that cloud nymph and the satyr?”

“Totally!” said the nymph with the poster. “So anyway, as punishment for blabbing, Hera cursed Echo so she could only repeat things, which was *fine* with us. But then Echo fell in love with our gorgeous guy, Narcissus—as if he would ever notice her.”

“As if!” said half a dozen others.

“Now she’s got some weird idea he needs saving,” said Mrs. Narcissus. “She should just go away.”

“Go away,” Echo growled back.

“I’m *so* glad Narcissus is alive again,” said another nymph in a gray dress. She had the words NARCISSUS + LAIEA written up and down her arms in black marker. “He’s like *the best*! And he’s in *my* territory.”

“Oh, stop it, Laiea,” her friend said. “*I’m* the pond nymph. You’re just the rock nymph.”

“Well, I’m the grass nymph,” another protested.

“No, he obviously came here because he likes the wildflowers!” another said. “Those are mine!”

The whole mob began arguing while Narcissus stared at the lake, ignoring them.

“Hold it!” Leo yelled. “Ladies, hold it! I need to ask Narcissus something.”

Slowly the nymphs settled down and went back to taking pictures.

Leo knelt next to the handsome dude. “So, Narcissus. What’s up?”

“Could you move?” Narcissus asked distractedly. “You’re ruining the view.”

Leo looked in the water. His own reflection rippled next to Narcissus’s on the surface of the submerged bronze. Leo didn’t have any desire to stare at himself. Compared to Narcissus, he looked like an undergrown troll. But there was no doubt the metal was a sheet of hammered Celestial bronze, roughly circular, about five feet in diameter.

What it was doing in this pond, Leo wasn’t sure. Celestial bronze fell to earth in odd places. He’d heard that most pieces were cast off from his dad’s various workshops. Hephaestus would lose his temper when projects didn’t work out, and he’d toss his scraps into the mortal world. This piece looked like it might have been meant as a shield for a god, but it hadn’t turned out properly. If Leo could get it back to the ship, it would be just enough bronze for his repairs.

“Right, great view,” Leo said. “Happy to move, but if you’re not using it, could I just take that sheet of bronze?”

“No,” Narcissus said. “I love him. He’s so gorgeous.”

Leo looked around to see if the nymphs were laughing. This *had* to be a huge joke. But they were swooning and nodding in agreement. Only Hazel seemed appalled. She wrinkled her nose as if she'd come to the conclusion that Narcissus smelled worse than he looked.

"Man," Leo said to Narcissus. "You *do* realize that you're looking at *yourself* in the water, right?"

"I am so great," Narcissus sighed. He stretched out a hand longingly to touch the water, but held back. "No, I can't make ripples. That ruins the image. Wow... I am *so* great."

"Yeah," Leo muttered. "But if I took the bronze, you could still see yourself in the water. Or here..." He reached in his tool belt and pulled out a simple mirror the size of a monocle. "I'll trade you."

Narcissus took the mirror, reluctantly, and admired himself. "Even *you* carry a picture of me? I don't blame you. I am gorgeous. Thank you." He set the mirror down and returned his attention to the pond. "But I already have a much better image. The color flatters me, don't you think?"

"Oh, gods, yes!" a nymph screamed. "Marry me, Narcissus!"

"No, me!" another cried. "Would you sign my poster?"

"No, sign my shirt!"

“No, sign my forehead!”

“No, sign my—”

“Stop it!” Hazel snapped.

“Stop it,” Echo agreed.

Leo had lost sight of Echo again, but now he realized she was kneeling on the other side of Narcissus, waving her hand in front of his face as if trying to break his concentration. Narcissus didn’t even blink.

The nymph fan club tried to shove Hazel out of the way, but she drew her cavalry sword and forced them back. “Snap out of it!” she yelled.

“He won’t sign your sword,” the poster nymph complained.

“He won’t marry you,” said the iPhone girl. “And you can’t take his bronze mirror! That’s what *keeps* him here!”

“You’re all ridiculous,” Hazel said. “He’s so *full* of himself! How can you possibly like him?”

“Like him,” Echo sighed, still waving her hand in front of his face.

The others sighed along with her.

“I am so hot,” Narcissus said sympathetically.

“Narcissus, listen.” Hazel kept her sword at the ready. “Echo brought us here to help you. Didn’t you, Echo?”

“Echo,” said Echo.

“Who?” Narcissus said.

“The only girl who cares what happens to you, apparently,” Hazel said. “Do you remember dying?”

Narcissus frowned. “I...no. That can’t be right. I am much too important to die.”

“You died staring at yourself,” Hazel insisted. “I remember the story now. Nemesis was the goddess who cursed you, because you broke so many hearts. Your punishment was to fall in love with your own reflection.”

“I love me so, so much,” Narcissus agreed.

“You finally died,” Hazel continued. “I don’t know which version of the story is true. You either drowned yourself or turned into a flower hanging over the water or—Echo, which is it?”

“Which is it?” she said hopelessly.

Leo stood. “It doesn’t matter. The point is you’re alive again, man. You have a second chance. That’s what Nemesis was telling us. You can get up, and get on with your life. Echo is trying to save you. Or you can stay here and stare at yourself until you die again.”

“Stay here!” all the nymphs screamed.

“Marry me before you die!” another squeaked.

Narcissus shook his head. “You just want my reflection. I don’t blame you, but you can’t have it. I belong to me.”

Hazel sighed in exasperation. She glanced at the

sun, which was sinking fast. Then she gestured with her sword toward the edge of the crater. “Leo, could we talk for a minute?”

“Excuse us,” Leo told Narcissus. “Echo, want to come with?”

“Come with,” Echo confirmed.

The nymphs clustered around Narcissus again and began recording new videos and taking more photos.

Hazel led the way until they were out of earshot. “Nemesis was right,” she said. “Some demigods can’t change their nature. Narcissus is going to stay there until he dies again.”

“No,” Leo said.

“No,” Echo agreed.

“We need that bronze,” Leo said. “If we take it away, it might give Narcissus a reason to snap out of it. Echo could have a chance to save him.”

“A chance to save him,” Echo said gratefully.

Hazel stabbed her sword in the sand. “It could also make several dozen nymphs very angry with us,” she said. “And Narcissus might still know how to shoot his bow.”

Leo pondered that. The sun was just about down. Nemesis had mentioned that Narcissus got agitated after dark, probably because he couldn’t see his reflection anymore. Leo didn’t want to stick around long enough to find out what the goddess meant by

agitated. He'd also had experience with mobs of crazed nymphs. He wasn't anxious to repeat that.

"Hazel," he said, "your power with precious metal — Can you just detect it, or can you actually summon it to you?"

She frowned. "Sometimes I can summon it. I've never tried with a piece of Celestial bronze that big before. I might be able to draw it to me through the earth, but I'd have to be fairly close. It would take a lot of concentration, and it wouldn't be fast."

"Be fast," Echo warned.

Leo cursed. He had hoped they could just go back to the ship, and Hazel could teleport the Celestial bronze from a safe distance.

"All right," he said. "We'll have to try something risky. Hazel, how about you try to summon the bronze from right here? Make it sink through the sand and tunnel over to you, then grab it and run for the ship."

"But Narcissus is looking at it all the time," she said.

"All the time," Echo echoed.

"That'll be my job," Leo said, hating his own plan already. "Echo and I will cause a distraction."

"Distraction?" Echo asked.

"I'll explain," Leo promised. "Are you willing?"

"Willing," Echo said.

"Great," Leo said. "Now, let's hope we don't die."

V I I I

LEO

LEO PSYCHED HIMSELF UP for an extreme makeover. He summoned some breath mints and a pair of welding goggles from his tool belt. The goggles weren't exactly sunglasses, but they'd have to do. He rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. He used some machine oil to grease back his hair. He stuck a wrench in his back pocket (why exactly, he wasn't sure) and he had Hazel draw a tattoo on his biceps with a marker: HOT STUFF, with a skull and crossbones.

"What in the world are you thinking?" She sounded

pretty flustered.

“I try not to think,” Leo admitted. “It interferes with being nuts. Just concentrate on moving that Celestial bronze. Echo, you ready?”

“Ready,” she said.

Leo took a deep breath. He strutted back toward the pond, hoping he looked awesome and not like he had some sort of nervous affliction. “Leo is the coolest!” he shouted.

“Leo is the coolest!” Echo shouted back.

“Yeah, baby, check me out!”

“Check me out!” Echo said.

“Make way for the king!”

“The king!”

“Narcissus is weak!”

“Weak!”

The crowd of nymphs scattered in surprise. Leo shooed them away as if they were bothering him. “No autographs, girls. I know you want some Leo time, but I’m way too cool. You better just hang around that ugly dweeb Narcissus. He’s lame!”

“Lame!” Echo said with enthusiasm.

The nymphs muttered angrily.

“What are you talking about?” one demanded.

“*You’re* lame,” said another.

Leo adjusted his goggles and smiled. He flexed his biceps, though he didn’t have much to flex, and showed

off his HOT STUFF tattoo. He had the nymphs' attention, if only because they were stunned; but Narcissus was still fixed on his own reflection.

"You know how ugly Narcissus is?" Leo asked the crowd. "He's so ugly, when he was born his mama thought he was a backward centaur—with a horse butt for a face."

Some of the nymphs gasped. Narcissus frowned, as though he was vaguely aware of a gnat buzzing around his head.

"You know why his bow has cobwebs?" Leo continued. "He uses it to hunt for dates, but he can't find one!"

One of the nymphs laughed. The others quickly elbowed her into silence.

Narcissus turned and scowled at Leo. "Who *are* you?"

"I'm the Super-sized McShizzle, man!" Leo said. "I'm Leo Valdez, bad boy supreme. And the ladies *love* a bad boy."

"Love a bad boy!" Echo said, with a convincing squeal.

Leo took out a pen and autographed the arm of one of the nymphs. "Narcissus is a loser! He's so weak, he can't bench-press a Kleenex. He's so lame, when you look up *lame* on Wikipedia, it's got a picture of Narcissus—only the picture's so *ugly*, no one ever

checks it out.”

Narcissus knit his handsome eyebrows. His face was turning from bronze to salmon pink. For the moment, he’d totally forgotten about the pond, and Leo could see the sheet of bronze sinking into the sand.

“What are you talking about?” Narcissus demanded. “I am amazing. Everyone knows this.”

“Amazing at *pure suck*,” Leo said. “If I was as *suck* as you, I’d drown myself. Oh wait, you already did that.”

Another nymph giggled. Then another. Narcissus growled, which did make him look a little less handsome. Meanwhile Leo beamed and wiggled his eyebrows over his goggles and spread his hands, gesturing for applause.

“That’s right!” he said. “Team Leo for the win!”

“Team Leo for the win!” Echo shouted. She’d wriggled into the mob of nymphs, and because she was so hard to see, the nymphs apparently thought the voice came from one of their own.

“Oh my god, I am so awesome!” Leo bellowed.

“So awesome!” Echo yelled back.

“He *is* funny,” a nymph ventured.

“And cute, in a scrawny way,” another said.

“Scrawny?” Leo asked. “Baby, I *invented* scrawny. Scrawny is the new *sizzling hot*. And I GOT the scrawny. Narcissus? He’s such a loser even the

Underworld didn't want him. He couldn't get the ghost girls to date him."

"Eww," said a nymph.

"Eww!" Echo agreed.

"Stop!" Narcissus got to his feet. "This is not right! This person is obviously not awesome, so he must be..." He struggled for the right words. It had probably been a long time since he'd talked about anything other than himself. "He must be tricking us."

Apparently Narcissus wasn't completely stupid. Realization dawned on his face. He turned back to the pond. "The bronze mirror is gone! My reflection! Give me back to me!"

"Team Leo!" one of the nymphs squeaked. But the others returned their attention to Narcissus.

"*I'm* the beautiful one!" Narcissus insisted. "He's stolen my mirror, and I'm going to leave unless we get it back!"

The girls gasped. One pointed. "There!"

Hazel was at the top of the crater, running away as fast as she could while lugging a large sheet of bronze.

"Get it back!" cried a nymph.

Probably against her will, Echo muttered, "Get it back."

"Yes!" Narcissus unslung his bow and grabbed an arrow from his dusty quiver. "The first one who gets that bronze, I will like you *almost* as much as I like me.

I might even kiss you, right after I kiss my reflection!”

“Oh my gods!” the nymphs screamed.

“And kill those demigods!” Narcissus added, glaring very handsomely at Leo. “They are *not* as cool as me!”

Leo could run pretty fast when someone was trying to kill him. Sadly, he’d had a lot of practice.

He overtook Hazel, which was easy, since she was struggling with fifty pounds of Celestial bronze. He took one side of the metal plate and glanced back. Narcissus was nocking an arrow, but it was so old and brittle, it broke into splinters.

“Ow!” he yelled very attractively. “My manicure!”

Normally nymphs were quick—at least the ones at Camp Half-Blood were—but these were burdened with posters, T-shirts, and other Narcissus™ merchandise. The nymphs also weren’t great at working as a team. They kept stumbling over one another, pushing and shoving. Echo made things worse by running among them, tripping and tackling as many as she could.

Still, they were closing rapidly.

“Call Arion!” Leo gasped.

“Already did!” Hazel said.

They ran for the beach. They made it to the edge of the water and could see the *Argo II*, but there was no way to get there. It was much too far to swim, even if

they hadn't been toting bronze.

Leo turned. The mob was coming over the dunes, - Narcissus in the lead, holding his bow like a band major's baton. The nymphs had conjured assorted weapons. Some held rocks. Some had wooden clubs wreathed in flowers. A few of the water nymphs had squirt guns—which seemed not quite as terrifying—but the look in their eyes was still murderous.

"Oh, man," Leo muttered, summoning fire in his free hand. "Straight-up fighting isn't my thing."

"Hold the Celestial bronze." Hazel drew her sword. "Get behind me!"

"Get behind me!" Echo repeated. The camouflaged girl was racing ahead of the mob now. She stopped in front of Leo and turned, spreading her arms as if she meant to personally shield him.

"Echo?" Leo could hardly talk with the lump in his throat. "You're one brave nymph."

"Brave nymph?" Her tone made it a question.

"I'm proud to have you on Team Leo," he said. "If we survive this, you should forget Narcissus."

"Forget Narcissus?" she said uncertainly.

"You're way too good for him."

The nymphs surrounded them in a semicircle.

"Trickery!" Narcissus said. "They don't love me, girls! *We* all love me, don't we?"

"Yes!" the girls screamed, except for one confused

nymph in a yellow dress who squeaked, “Team Leo!”

“Kill them!” Narcissus ordered.

The nymphs surged forward, but the sand in front of them exploded. Arion raced out of nowhere, circling the mob so quickly he created a sandstorm, showering the nymphs in white lime, spraying their eyes.

“I love this horse!” Leo said.

The nymphs collapsed, coughing and gagging. Narcissus stumbled around blindly, swinging his bow like he was trying to hit a piñata.

Hazel climbed into the saddle, hoisted up the bronze, and offered Leo a hand.

“We can’t leave Echo!” Leo said.

“Leave Echo,” the nymph repeated.

She smiled, and for the first time Leo could clearly see her face. She really was pretty. Her eyes were bluer than he’d realized. How had he missed that?

“Why?” Leo asked. “You don’t think you can still save Narcissus...”

“Save Narcissus,” she said confidently. And even though it was only an echo, Leo could tell that she meant it. She’d been given a second chance at life, and she was determined to use it to save the guy she loved—even if he was a completely hopeless (though very handsome) moron.

Leo wanted to protest, but Echo leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek, then pushed him gently away.

“Leo, come on!” Hazel called.

The other nymphs were starting to recover. They wiped the lime out of their eyes, which were now glowing green with anger. Leo looked for Echo again, but she had dissolved into the scenery.

“Yeah,” he said, his throat dry. “Yeah, okay.”

He climbed up behind Hazel. Arion took off across the water, the nymphs screaming behind them, and Narcissus shouting, “Bring me back! Bring me back!”

As Arion raced toward the *Argo II*, Leo remembered what Nemesis had said about Echo and Narcissus: *Perhaps they'll teach you a lesson.*

Leo had thought she'd meant Narcissus, but now he wondered if the real lesson for him was Echo—invisible to her brethren, cursed to love someone who didn't care for her. *A seventh wheel.* He tried to shake that thought. He clung to the sheet of bronze like a shield.

He was determined never to forget Echo's face. She deserved at least one person who saw her and knew how good she was. Leo closed his eyes, but the memory of her smile was already fading.

I X

PIPER

PIPER DIDN'T WANT TO USE THE KNIFE.

But sitting in Jason's cabin, waiting for him to wake up, she felt alone and helpless.

Jason's face was so pale, he might've been dead. She remembered the awful sound of that brick hitting his forehead—an injury that had happened only because he'd tried to shield her from the Romans.

Even with the nectar and ambrosia they'd managed to force-feed him, Piper couldn't be sure he would be okay when he woke up. What if he'd lost his memories

again—but this time, his memories of *her*?

That would be the cruelest trick the gods had played on her yet, and they'd played some pretty cruel tricks.

She heard Gleeson Hedge in his room next door, humming a military song—"Stars and Stripes Forever," maybe? Since the satellite TV was out, the satyr was probably sitting on his bunk reading back issues of *Guns & Ammo* magazine. He wasn't a bad chaperone, but he was definitely the most warlike old goat Piper had ever met.

Of course she was grateful to the satyr. He had helped her dad, movie actor Tristan McLean, get back on his feet after being kidnapped by giants the past winter. A few weeks ago, Hedge had asked his girlfriend, Mellie, to take charge of the McLean household so he could come along to help with this quest.

Coach Hedge had tried to make it sound like returning to Camp Half-Blood had been all his idea, but Piper suspected there was more to it. The last few weeks, whenever Piper called home, her dad and Mellie had asked her what was wrong. Maybe something in her voice had tipped them off.

Piper couldn't share the visions she'd seen. They were too disturbing. Besides, her dad had taken a potion that had erased all of Piper's demigod secrets

from his memory. But he could still tell when she was upset, and she was pretty sure her dad had encouraged Coach to look out for her.

She shouldn't draw her blade. It would only make her feel worse.

Finally the temptation was too great. She unsheathed Katoptris. It didn't look very special, just a triangular blade with an unadorned hilt, but it had once been owned by Helen of Troy. The dagger's name meant "looking glass."

Piper gazed at the bronze blade. At first, she saw only her reflection. Then light rippled across the metal. She saw a crowd of Roman demigods gathered in the forum. The blond scarecrow-looking kid, Octavian, was speaking to the mob, shaking his fist. Piper couldn't hear him, but the gist was obvious: *We need to kill those Greeks!*

Reyna, the praetor, stood to one side, her face tight with suppressed emotion. Bitterness? Anger? Piper wasn't sure.

She'd been prepared to hate Reyna, but she couldn't. During the feast in the forum, Piper had admired the way Reyna kept her feelings in check.

Reyna had sized up Piper and Jason's relationship right away. As a daughter of Aphrodite, Piper could tell stuff like that. Yet Reyna had stayed polite and in control. She'd put her camp's needs ahead of her

emotions. She'd given the Greeks a fair chance...right up until the *Argo II* had started destroying her city.

She'd almost made Piper feel guilty about being Jason's girlfriend, though that was silly. Jason hadn't ever *been* Reyna's boyfriend, not really.

Maybe Reyna wasn't so bad, but it didn't matter now. They'd messed up the chance for peace. Piper's power of persuasion had, for once, done absolutely no good.

Her secret fear? Maybe she hadn't tried hard enough. Piper had never wanted to make friends with the Romans. She was too worried about losing Jason to his old life. Maybe unconsciously she hadn't put her best effort into the charmspeak.

Now Jason was hurt. The ship had been almost destroyed. And according to her dagger, that crazy teddy-bear-strangling kid, Octavian, was whipping the Romans into a war frenzy.

The scene in her blade shifted. There was a rapid series of images she'd seen before, but she still didn't understand them: Jason riding into battle on horseback, his eyes gold instead of blue; a woman in an old-fashioned Southern belle dress, standing in an oceanside park with palm trees; a bull with the face of a bearded man, rising out of a river; and two giants in matching yellow togas, hoisting a rope on a pulley system, lifting a large bronze vase out of a pit.

Then came the worst vision: she saw herself with Jason and Percy, standing waist-deep in water at the bottom of a dark circular chamber, like a giant well. Ghostly shapes moved through the water as it rose rapidly. Piper clawed at the walls, trying to escape, but there was nowhere to go. The water reached their chests. Jason was pulled under. Percy stumbled and disappeared.

How could a child of the sea god drown? Piper didn't know, but she watched herself in the vision, alone and thrashing in the dark, until the water rose over her head.

Piper shut her eyes. *Don't show me that again*, she pleaded. *Show me something helpful*.

She forced herself to look at the blade again.

This time, she saw an empty highway cutting between fields of wheat and sunflowers. A mileage marker read: TOPEKA 32. On the shoulder of the road stood a man in khaki shorts and a purple camp shirt. His face was lost in the shadow of a broad hat, the brim wreathed in leafy vines. He held up a silver goblet and beckoned to Piper. Somehow she knew he was offering her some sort of gift—a cure, or an antidote.

“Hey,” Jason croaked.

Piper was so startled she dropped the knife. “You’re awake!”

“Don’t sound so surprised.” Jason touched his

bandaged head and frowned. “What... what happened? I remember the explosions, and—”

“You remember who I am?”

Jason tried to laugh, but it turned into a painful wince. “Last I checked, you were my awesome girlfriend Piper. Unless something has changed since I was out?”

Piper was so relieved she almost sobbed. She helped him sit up and gave him some nectar to sip while she brought him up to speed. She was just explaining Leo’s plan to fix the ship when she heard horse hooves clomping across the deck over their heads.

Moments later, Leo and Hazel stumbled to a stop in the doorway, carrying a large sheet of hammered bronze between them.

“Gods of Olympus.” Piper stared at Leo. “What happened to *you*?”

His hair was greased back. He had welding goggles on his forehead, a lipstick mark on his cheek, tattoos all over his arms, and a T-shirt that read HOT STUFF, BAD BOY, and TEAM LEO.

“Long story,” he said. “Others back?”

“Not yet,” Piper said.

Leo cursed. Then he noticed Jason sitting up, and his face brightened. “Hey, man! Glad you’re better. I’ll be in the engine room.”

He ran off with the sheet of bronze, leaving Hazel in the doorway.

Piper raised an eyebrow at her. "*Team Leo?*"

"We met Narcissus," Hazel said, which didn't really explain much. "Also Nemesis, the revenge goddess."

Jason sighed. "I miss all the fun."

On the deck above, something went *THUMP*, as if a heavy creature had landed. Annabeth and Percy came running down the hall. Percy was toting a steaming five-gallon plastic bucket that smelled horrible. Annabeth had a patch of black sticky stuff in her hair. Percy's shirt was covered in it.

"Roofing tar?" Piper guessed.

Frank stumbled up behind them, which made the hallway pretty jam-packed with demigods. Frank had a big smear of the black sludge down his face.

"Ran into some tar monsters," Annabeth said. "Hey, Jason, glad you're awake. Hazel, where's Leo?"

She pointed down. "Engine room."

Suddenly the entire ship listed to port. The demigods stumbled. Percy almost spilled his bucket of tar.

"Uh, what was that?" he demanded.

"Oh..." Hazel looked embarrassed. "We may have angered the nymphs who live in this lake. Like... *all* of them."

“Great.” Percy handed the bucket of tar to Frank and Annabeth. “You guys help Leo. I’ll hold off the water spirits as long as I can.”

“On it!” Frank promised.

The three of them ran off, leaving Hazel at the cabin door. The ship listed again, and Hazel hugged her stomach like she was going to be sick.

“I’ll just...” She swallowed, pointed weakly down the passageway, and ran off.

Jason and Piper stayed below as the ship rocked back and forth. For a hero, Piper felt pretty useless. Waves crashed against the hull as angry voices came from above deck—Percy shouting, Coach Hedge yelling at the lake. Festus the figurehead breathed fire several times. Down the hall, Hazel moaned miserably in her cabin. In the engine room below, it sounded like Leo and the others were doing an Irish line dance with anvils tied to their feet. After what seemed like hours, the engine began to hum. The oars creaked and groaned, and Piper felt the ship lift into the air.

The rocking and shaking stopped. The ship became quiet except for the drone of machinery. Finally Leo emerged from the engine room. He was caked in sweat, lime dust, and tar. His T-shirt looked like it had been caught in an escalator and chewed to shreds. The TEAM LEO on his chest now read: AM LEO. But he grinned like a madman and announced that they were safely under

way.

“Meeting in the mess hall, one hour,” he said.
“Crazy day, huh?”

After everyone had cleaned up, Coach Hedge took the helm and the demigods gathered below for dinner. It was the first time they’d all sat down together—just the seven of them. Maybe their presence should’ve reassured Piper, but seeing all of them in one place only reminded her that the Prophecy of Seven was unfolding at last. No more waiting for Leo to finish the ship. No more easy days at Camp Half-Blood, pretending the future was still a long way off. They were under way, with a bunch of angry Romans behind them and the ancient lands ahead. The giants would be waiting. Gaea was rising. And unless they succeeded in this quest, the world would be destroyed.

The others must’ve felt it too. The tension in the mess hall was like an electrical storm brewing, which was totally possible, considering Percy’s and Jason’s powers. In an awkward moment, the two boys tried to sit in the same chair at the head of the table. Sparks literally flew from Jason’s hands. After a brief silent standoff, like they were both thinking, *Seriously, dude?*, they ceded the chair to Annabeth and sat at opposite sides of the table.

The crew compared notes on what had happened in

Salt Lake City, but even Leo's ridiculous story about how he tricked Narcissus wasn't enough to cheer up the group.

"So where to now?" Leo asked with a mouthful of pizza. "I did a quick repair job to get us out of the lake, but there's still a lot of damage. We should really put down again and fix things right before we head across the Atlantic."

Percy was eating a piece of pie, which for some reason was completely blue—filling, crust, even the whipped cream. "We need to put some distance between us and Camp Jupiter," he said. "Frank spotted some eagles over Salt Lake City. We figure the Romans aren't far behind us."

That didn't improve the mood around the table. Piper didn't want to say anything, but she felt obliged... and a little guilty. "I don't suppose we should go back and try to reason with the Romans? Maybe—maybe I didn't try hard enough with the charmspeak."

Jason took her hand. "It wasn't your fault, Pipes. Or Leo's," he added quickly. "Whatever happened, it was Gaea's doing, to drive the two camps apart."

Piper was grateful for his support, but she still felt uneasy. "Maybe if we could explain that, though—"

"With no proof?" Annabeth asked. "And no idea what really happened? I appreciate what you're saying, Piper. I don't want the Romans on our bad side, but

until we understand what Gaea's up to, going back is suicide."

"She's right," Hazel said. She still looked a little queasy from seasickness, but she was trying to eat a few saltine crackers. The rim of her plate was embedded with rubies, and Piper was pretty sure they hadn't been there at the beginning of the meal. "Reyna might listen, but Octavian won't. The Romans have honor to think about. They've been attacked. They'll shoot first and ask questions post hac."

Piper stared at her own dinner. The magical plates could conjure up a great selection of vegetarian stuff. She especially liked the avocado and grilled pepper quesadilla, but tonight she didn't have much of an appetite.

She thought about the visions she'd seen in her knife: Jason with golden eyes; the bull with the human head; the two giants in yellow togas hoisting a bronze jar from a pit. Worst of all, she remembered herself drowning in black water.

Piper had always liked the water. She had good memories of surfing with her dad. But since she'd started seeing that vision in Katoptris, she'd been thinking more and more of an old Cherokee story her granddad used to tell to keep her away from the river near his cabin. He told her the Cherokees believed in good water spirits, like the naiads of the Greeks; but

they also believed in evil water spirits, the water cannibals, who hunted mortals with invisible arrows and were especially fond of drowning small children.

"You're right," she decided. "We have to keep going. Not just because of the Romans. We have to hurry."

Hazel nodded. "Nemesis said we have only six days until Nico dies and Rome is destroyed."

Jason frowned. "You mean *Rome* Rome, not New Rome?"

"I think," Hazel said. "But if so, that's not much time."

"Why six days?" Percy wondered. "And how are they going to destroy Rome?"

No one answered. Piper didn't want to add further bad news, but she felt she had to.

"There's more," she said. "I've been seeing some things in my knife."

The big kid, Frank, froze with a forkful of spaghetti halfway to his mouth. "Things such as...?"

"They don't really make sense," Piper said, "just garbled images, but I saw two giants, dressed alike. Maybe twins."

Annabeth stared at the magical video feed from Camp Half-Blood on the wall. Right now it showed the living room in the Big House: a cozy fire on the hearth and Seymour, the stuffed leopard head, snoring

contentedly above the mantel.

“Twins, like in Ella’s prophecy,” Annabeth said. “If we could figure out those lines, it might help.”

“*Wisdom’s daughter walks alone,*” Percy said. “*The Mark of Athena burns through Rome.* Annabeth, that’s got to mean you. Juno told me...well, she said you had a hard task ahead of you in Rome. She said she doubted you could do it. But I know she’s wrong.”

Annabeth took a long breath. “Reyna was about to tell me something right before the ship fired on us. She said there was an old legend among the Roman praetors—something that had to do with Athena. She said it might be the reason Greeks and Romans could never get along.”

Leo and Hazel exchanged nervous looks.

“Nemesis mentioned something similar,” Leo said. “She talked about an old score that had to be settled—”

“The one thing that might bring the gods’ two natures into harmony,” Hazel recalled. “‘An old wrong finally avenged.’”

Percy drew a frowny face in his blue whipped cream. “I was only a praetor for about two hours. Jason, you ever hear a legend like that?”

Jason was still holding Piper’s hand. His fingers had turned clammy.

“I...uh, I’m not sure,” he said. “I’ll give it some thought.”

Percy narrowed his eyes. "You're not *sure*?"

Jason didn't respond. Piper wanted to ask him what was wrong. She could tell he didn't want to discuss this old legend. She caught his eye, and he pleaded silently, *Later.*

Hazel broke the silence. "What about the other lines?" She turned her ruby-encrusted plate. "*Twins snuff out the angel's breath, Who holds the key to endless death.*"

"*Giants' bane stands gold and pale,*" Frank added, "*Won through pain from a woven jail.*"

"Giants' bane," Leo said. "Anything that's a giants' bane is good for us, right? That's probably what we need to find. If it can help the gods get their schizophrenic act together, that's good."

Percy nodded. "We can't kill the giants without the help of the gods."

Jason turned to Frank and Hazel. "I thought you guys killed that one giant in Alaska without a god's help, just the two of you."

"Alcyoneus was a special case," Frank said. "He was only immortal in the territory where he was reborn—Alaska. But not in Canada. I wish I could kill *all* the giants by dragging them across the border from Alaska into Canada, but..." He shrugged. "Percy's right, we'll need the gods."

Piper gazed at the walls. She really wished Leo

hadn't enchanted them with images of Camp Half-Blood. It was like a doorway to home that she could never go through. She watched the hearth of Hestia burning in the middle of the green as the cabins turned off their lights for curfew.

She wondered how the Roman demigods, Frank and Hazel, felt about those images. They'd never even been to Camp Half-Blood. Did it seem alien to them, or unfair that Camp Jupiter wasn't represented? Did it make them miss their own home?

The other lines of the prophecy turned in Piper's mind. What was a woven jail? How could twins snuff out an angel's breath? The key to endless death didn't sound very cheerful, either.

"So..." Leo pushed his chair away from the table. "First things first, I guess. We'll have to put down in the morning to finish repairs."

"Someplace close to a city," Annabeth suggested, "in case we need supplies. But somewhere out of the way, so the Romans will have trouble finding us. Any ideas?"

No one spoke. Piper remembered her vision in the knife: the strange man in purple, holding out a goblet and beckoning to her. He'd been standing in front of a sign that read TOPEKA 32.

"Well," she ventured, "how do you guys feel about Kansas?"

X

PIPER

PIPER HAD TROUBLE FALLING ASLEEP.

Coach Hedge spent the first hour after curfew doing his nightly duty, walking up and down the passageway yelling, “Lights out! Settle down! Try to sneak out, and I’ll smack you back to Long Island!”

He banged his baseball bat against a cabin door whenever he heard a noise, shouting at everyone to go to sleep, which made it impossible for *anyone* to go to sleep. Piper figured this was the most fun the satyr had had since he’d pretended to be a gym teacher at the

Wilderness School.

She stared at the bronze beams on the ceiling. Her cabin was pretty cozy. Leo had programmed their quarters to adjust automatically to the occupant's preferred temperature, so it was never too cold or too hot. The mattress and the pillows were stuffed with pegasus down (no pegasi were harmed in the making of these products, Leo had assured her), so they were über-comfortable. A bronze lantern hung from the ceiling, glowing at whatever brightness Piper wished. The lantern's sides were perforated with pinholes, so at night glimmering constellations drifted across her walls.

Piper had so many things on her mind, she thought she'd never sleep. But there was something peaceful about the rocking of the boat and the drone of the aerial oars as they scooped through the sky.

Finally her eyelids got heavy, and she drifted off.

It seemed like only a few seconds had passed before she woke to the breakfast bell.

"Yo, Piper!" Leo knocked on her door. "We're landing!"

"Landing?" She sat up groggily.

Leo opened her door and poked his head in. He had his hand over his eyes, which would've been a nice gesture if he hadn't been peeking through his fingers. "You decent?"

“Leo!”

“Sorry.” He grinned. “Hey, nice Power Ranger jammies.”

“They are not Power Rangers! They’re Cherokee eagles!”

“Yeah, sure. Anyway, we’re setting down a few miles outside Topeka, as requested. And, um...” He glanced out in the passageway, then leaned inside again. “Thanks for not hating me, about blowing up the Romans yesterday.”

Piper rubbed her eyes. The feast in New Rome had been only yesterday? “That’s okay, Leo. You weren’t in control of yourself.”

“Yeah, but still...you didn’t have to stick up for me.”

“Are you kidding? You’re like the annoying little brother I never had. Of course I’ll stick up for you.”

“Uh... thanks?”

From above, Coach Hedge yelled, “Thar she blows! Kansas, ahoy!”

“Holy Hephaestus,” Leo muttered. “He really needs to work on his shipspeak. I’d better get above deck.”

By the time Piper had showered, changed, and grabbed a bagel from the mess hall, she could hear the ship’s landing gear extending. She climbed on deck and joined the others as the *Argo II* settled in the middle of a field of sunflowers. The oars retracted. The gangplank

lowered itself.

The morning air smelled of irrigation, warm plants, and fertilized earth. Not a bad smell. It reminded Piper of Grandpa Tom's place in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, back on the reservation.

Percy was the first to notice her. He smiled in greeting, which for some reason surprised Piper. He was wearing faded jeans and a fresh orange Camp Half-Blood T-shirt, as if he'd never been away from the Greek side. The new clothes had probably helped his mood—and of course the fact that he was standing at the rail with his arm around Annabeth.

Piper was happy to see Annabeth with a sparkle in her eyes, because Piper had never had a better friend. For months, Annabeth had been tormenting herself, her every waking moment consumed with the search for Percy. Now, despite the dangerous quest they were facing, at least she had her boyfriend back.

"So!" Annabeth plucked the bagel out of Piper's hand and took a bite, but that didn't bother Piper. Back at camp, they'd had a running joke about stealing each other's breakfast. "Here we are. What's the plan?"

"I want to check out the highway," Piper said. "Find the sign that says Topeka 32."

Leo spun his Wii controller in a circle, and the sails lowered themselves. "We shouldn't be far," he said. "Festus and I calculated the landing as best we could.

What do you expect to find at the mile marker?"

Piper explained what she'd seen in the knife—the man in purple with a goblet. She kept quiet about the other images, though, like the vision of Percy, Jason, and herself drowning. She wasn't sure what it meant, anyway; and everyone seemed in such better spirits this morning, she didn't want to ruin the mood.

"Purple shirt?" Jason asked. "Vines on his hat? Sounds like Bacchus."

"Dionysus," Percy muttered. "If we came all the way to Kansas to see *Mr. D*—"

"Bacchus isn't so bad," Jason said. "I don't like his followers much..."

Piper shuddered. Jason, Leo, and she had had an encounter with the maenads a few months ago and almost gotten torn to pieces.

"But the god himself is okay," Jason continued. "I did him a favor once up in the wine country."

Percy looked appalled. "Whatever, man. Maybe he's better on the Roman side. But why would he be hanging around in Kansas? Didn't Zeus order the gods to cease all contact with mortals?"

Frank grunted. The big guy was wearing a blue - tracksuit this morning, like he was ready to go for a jog in the sunflowers.

"The gods haven't been very good at following *that* order," he noted. "Besides, if the gods *have* gone

schizophrenic like Hazel said—”

“And *Leo* said,” added Leo.

Frank scowled at him. “Then who knows what’s going on with the Olympians? Could be some pretty bad stuff out there.”

“Sounds dangerous!” Leo agreed cheerfully. “Well...you guys have fun. I’ve got to finish repairs on the hull. Coach Hedge is gonna work on the broken crossbows. And, uh, Annabeth—I could really use your help. You’re the only other person who even *sort of* understands engineering.”

Annabeth looked apologetically at Percy. “He’s right. I should stay and help.”

“I’ll come back to you.” He kissed her on the cheek. “Promise.”

They were so easy together, it made Piper’s heart ache.

Jason was great, of course. But sometimes he acted so distant, like last night, when he’d been reluctant to talk about that old Roman legend. So often he seemed to be thinking of his old life at Camp Jupiter. Piper wondered if she would ever be able to break through that barrier.

The trip to Camp Jupiter, seeing Reyna in person, hadn’t helped. Neither did the fact that Jason had chosen to wear a purple shirt today—the color of the Romans.

Frank slid his bow off his shoulder and propped it against the rail. “I think I should turn into a crow or something and fly around, keep an eye out for Roman eagles.”

“Why a crow?” Leo asked. “Man, if you can turn into a dragon, why don’t you just turn into a dragon every time? That’s the coolest.”

Frank’s face looked like it was being infused with cranberry juice. “That’s like asking why you don’t bench-press your maximum weight every time you lift. Because it’s hard, and you’d hurt yourself. Turning into a dragon isn’t easy.”

“Oh.” Leo nodded. “I wouldn’t know. I don’t lift weights.”

“Yeah. Well, maybe you should consider it, Mr.—”

Hazel stepped between them.

“I’ll help you, Frank,” she said, shooting Leo an evil look. “I can summon Arion and scout around below.”

“Sure,” Frank said, still glaring at Leo. “Yeah, thanks.”

Piper wondered what was going on with those three. The boys showing off for Hazel and razzing each other—*that* she understood. But it almost seemed like Hazel and Leo had a history. So far as she knew, they’d met for the first time just yesterday. She wondered if something else had happened on their trip to the Great

Salt Lake—something they hadn't mentioned.

Hazel turned to Percy. "Just be careful when you go out there. Lots of fields, lots of crops. Could be *karpoi* on the loose."

"*Karpoi*?" Piper asked.

"Grain spirits," Hazel said. "You don't want to meet them."

Piper didn't see how a grain spirit could be so bad, but Hazel's tone convinced her not to ask.

"That leaves three of us to check on the mile marker," Percy said. "Me, Jason, Piper. I'm not psyched about seeing Mr. D again. That guy is a pain. But, Jason, if you're on better terms with him—"

"Yeah," Jason said. "If we find him, I'll talk to him. Piper, it's your vision. You should take the lead."

Piper shivered. She'd seen the three of them drowning in that dark well. Was Kansas where it would happen? That didn't seem right, but she couldn't be sure.

"Of course," she said, trying to sound upbeat. "Let's find the highway."

Leo had said they were close. His idea of "close" needed some work.

After trudging half a mile through hot fields, getting bitten by mosquitoes and whacked in the face with scratchy sunflowers, they finally reached the road.

An old billboard for Bubba's Gas 'n' Grub indicated they were still forty miles from the first Topeka exit.

"Correct my math," Percy said, "but doesn't that mean we have eight miles to walk?"

Jason peered both ways down the deserted road. He looked better today, thanks to the magical healing of ambrosia and nectar. His color was back to normal, and the scar on his forehead had almost vanished. The new *gladius* that Hera had given him last winter hung at his belt. Most guys would look pretty awkward walking around with a scabbard strapped to their jeans, but on Jason it seemed perfectly natural.

"No cars..." he said. "But I guess we wouldn't want to hitchhike."

"No," Piper agreed, gazing nervously down the highway. "We've already spent too much time going overland. The earth is Gaea's territory."

"Hmm..." Jason snapped his fingers. "I can call a friend for a ride."

Percy raised his eyebrows. "Oh, yeah? Me too. Let's see whose friend gets here first."

Jason whistled. Piper knew what he was doing, but he'd succeeded in summoning Tempest only three times since they'd met the storm spirit at the Wolf House last winter. Today, the sky was so blue, Piper didn't see how it could work.

Percy simply closed his eyes and concentrated.

Piper hadn't studied him up close before. After hearing so much at Camp Half-Blood about Percy Jackson *this* and Percy Jackson *that*, she thought he looked...well, unimpressive, especially next to Jason. Percy was more slender, about an inch shorter, with slightly longer, much darker hair.

He wasn't really Piper's type. If she'd seen him in the mall somewhere, she probably would've thought he was a skater—cute in a scruffy way, a little on the wild side, definitely a troublemaker. She would have steered clear. She had enough trouble in her life. But she could see why Annabeth liked him, and she could definitely see why Percy needed Annabeth in his life. If anybody could keep a guy like that under control, it was Annabeth.

Thunder crackled in the clear sky.

Jason smiled. "Soon."

"Too late." Percy pointed east, where a black winged shape was spiraling toward them. At first, Piper thought it might be Frank in crow form. Then she realized it was much too big to be a bird.

"A black pegasus?" she said. "Never seen one like that."

The winged stallion came in for a landing. He trotted over to Percy and nuzzled his face, then turned his head inquisitively toward Piper and Jason.

"Blackjack," Percy said, "this is Piper and Jason.

They're friends."

The horse nickered.

"Uh, maybe later," Percy answered.

Piper had heard that Percy could speak to horses, being the son of the horse lord Poseidon, but she'd never seen it in action.

"What does Blackjack want?" she asked.

"Donuts," Percy said. "Always donuts. He can carry all three of us if—"

Suddenly the air turned cold. Piper's ears popped. About fifty yards away, a miniature cyclone three stories tall tore across the tops of the sunflowers like a scene from *The Wizard of Oz*. It touched down on the road next to Jason and took the form of a horse—a misty steed with lightning flickering through its body.

"Tempest," Jason said, grinning broadly. "Long time, my friend."

The storm spirit reared and whinnied. Blackjack backed up skittishly.

"Easy, boy," Percy said. "He's a friend too." He gave Jason an impressed look. "Nice ride, Grace."

Jason shrugged. "I made friends with him during our fight at the Wolf House. He's a free spirit, literally, but once in a while he agrees to help me."

Percy and Jason climbed on their respective horses. Piper had never been comfortable with Tempest. Riding full gallop on a beast that could vaporize at any

moment made her a bit nervous. Nevertheless, she accepted Jason's hand and climbed on.

Tempest raced down the road with Blackjack soaring overhead. Fortunately, they didn't pass any cars, or they might have caused a wreck. In no time, they arrived at the thirty-two-mile marker, which looked exactly as Piper had seen it in her vision.

Blackjack landed. Both horses pawed the asphalt. Neither looked pleased to have stopped so suddenly, just when they'd found their stride.

Blackjack whinnied.

"You're right," Percy said. "No sign of the wine dude."

"I beg your pardon?" said a voice from the fields.

Tempest turned so quickly, Piper almost fell off.

The wheat parted, and the man from her vision stepped into view. He wore a wide-brimmed hat wreathed in grapevines, a purple short-sleeved shirt, khaki shorts, and Birkenstocks with white socks. He looked maybe thirty, with a slight potbelly, like a frat boy who hadn't yet realized college was over.

"Did someone just call me the *wine dude*?" he asked in a lazy drawl. "It's Bacchus, please. Or Mr. Bacchus. Or Lord Bacchus. Or, sometimes, Oh-My-Gods-Please-Don't-Kill-Me, Lord Bacchus."

Percy urged Blackjack forward, though the pegasus didn't seem happy about it.

“You look different,” Percy told the god. “Skinnier. Your hair is longer. And your shirt isn’t so loud.”

The wine god squinted up at him. “What in blazes are you talking about? Who are you, and where is Ceres?”

“Uh... what series?”

“I think he means Ceres,” Jason said. “The goddess of agriculture. You’d call her Demeter.” He nodded respectfully to the god. “Lord Bacchus, do you remember me? I helped you with that missing leopard in Sonoma.”

Bacchus scratched his stubbly chin. “Ah...yes. John Green.”

“Jason Grace.”

“Whatever,” the god said. “Did Ceres send you, then?”

“No, Lord Bacchus,” Jason said. “Were you expecting to meet her here?”

The god snorted. “Well, I didn’t come to Kansas to *party*, my boy. Ceres asked me here for a council of war. What with Gaea rising, the crops are withering. Droughts are spreading. The *karpoi* are in revolt. Even my grapes aren’t safe. Ceres wanted a united front in the plant war.”

“The plant war,” Percy said. “You’re going to arm all the little grapes with tiny assault rifles?”

The god narrowed his eyes. “Have we met?”

“At Camp Half-Blood,” Percy said, “I know you as Mr. D—Dionysus.”

“Agh!” Bacchus winced and pressed his hands to his temples. For a moment, his image flickered. Piper saw a different person—fatter, dumpier, in a much louder, leopard-patterned shirt. Then Bacchus returned to being Bacchus. “Stop that!” he demanded. “Stop thinking about me in Greek!”

Percy blinked. “Uh, but—”

“Do you have any idea how *hard* it is to stay focused? Splitting headaches all the time! I never know what I’m doing or where I’m going! Constantly grumpy!”

“That sounds pretty normal for you,” Percy said.

The god’s nostrils flared. One of the grape leaves on his hat burst into flame. “If we know each other from that *other* camp, it’s a wonder I haven’t already turned you into a dolphin.”

“It was discussed,” Percy assured him. “I think you were just too lazy to do it.”

Piper had been watching with horrified fascination, the way she might watch a car wreck in progress. Now she realized Percy was *not* making things better, and Annabeth wasn’t around to rein him in. Piper figured her friend would never forgive her if she brought Percy back transformed into a sea mammal.

“Lord Bacchus!” she interrupted, slipping off

Tempest's back.

"Piper, careful," Jason said.

She shot him a warning glance: *I've got this.*

"Sorry to trouble you, my lord," she told the god, "but actually we came here to get your advice. Please, we need your wisdom."

She used her most agreeable tone, pouring respect into her charmspeak.

The god frowned, but the purple glow faded in his eyes. "You're well-spoken, girl. Advice, eh? Very well. I would avoid karaoke. Really, theme parties in general are out. In these austere times, people are looking for a simple, low-key affair, with locally produced organic snacks and—"

"Not about parties," Piper interrupted. "Although that's incredibly useful advice, Lord Bacchus. We were hoping you'd help us on our quest."

She explained about the *Argo II* and their voyage to stop the giants from awakening Gaea. She told him what Nemesis had said: that in six days, Rome would be destroyed. She described the vision reflected in her knife, where Bacchus offered her a silver goblet.

"Silver goblet?" The god didn't sound very excited. He grabbed a Diet Pepsi from nowhere and popped the top of the can.

"You drink Diet Coke," Percy said.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Bacchus

snapped. “As to this vision of the goblet, young lady, I have nothing for you to drink unless you want a Pepsi. Jupiter has put me under strict orders to avoid giving wine to minors. Bothersome, but there you have it. As for the giants, I know them well. I fought in the first Giant War, you know.”

“You can fight?” Percy asked.

Piper wished he hadn’t sounded so incredulous.

Dionysus snarled. His Diet Pepsi transformed into a five-foot staff wreathed in ivy, topped with a pinecone.

“A *thyrsus*!” Piper said, hoping to distract the god before he whacked Percy on the head. She’d seen weapons like that before in the hands of crazy nymphs, and wasn’t thrilled to see one again, but she tried to sound impressed. “Oh, what a mighty weapon!”

“Indeed,” Bacchus agreed. “I’m glad *someone* in your group is smart. The pinecone is a fearsome tool of destruction! I was a demigod myself in the first Giant War, you know. The son of Jupiter!”

Jason flinched. Probably he wasn’t thrilled to be reminded that the Wine Dude was technically his big brother.

Bacchus swung his staff through the air, though his potbelly almost threw him off balance. “Of course that was long before I invented wine and became an immortal. I fought side by side with the gods and some other demigod... Harry Cleese, I think.”

“Heracles?” Piper suggested politely.

“Whatever,” Bacchus said. “Anyway, I killed the giant Ephialtes and his brother Otis. Horrible boors, those two. Pinecone in the face for both of them!”

Piper held her breath. All at once, several ideas came together in her head—the visions in the knife, the lines of the prophecy they’d been discussing the night before. She felt like she used to when she was scuba diving with her father, and he would wipe her mask for her underwater. Suddenly, everything was clearer.

“Lord Bacchus,” she said, trying to control the nervousness in her voice. “Those two giants, Ephialtes and Otis... would they happen to be twins?”

“Hmm?” The god seemed distracted by his *thyrsus*-swinging, but he nodded. “Yes, twins. That’s right.”

Piper turned to Jason. She could tell he was following her thoughts: *Twins snuff out the angel’s breath.*

In the blade of Katoptris, she’d seen two giants in yellow robes, lifting a jar from a deep pit.

“That’s why we’re here,” Piper told the god. “You’re part of our quest!”

Bacchus frowned. “I’m sorry, my girl. I’m not a demigod anymore. I don’t *do* quests.”

“But giants can only be killed by heroes and gods working together,” she insisted. “You’re a god now, and the two giants we have to fight are Ephialtes and

Otis. I think...I think they're waiting for us in Rome. They're going to destroy the city somehow. The silver goblet I saw in my vision—maybe it's meant as a symbol for your help. You *have* to help us kill the giants!"

Bacchus glared at her, and Piper realized she'd chosen her words poorly.

"My girl," he said coldly, "I don't *have* to do anything. Besides, I only help those who give me proper tribute, which no one has managed to do in many, many centuries."

Blackjack whinnied uneasily.

Piper couldn't blame him. She didn't like the sound of *tribute*. She remembered the maenads, the crazed followers of Bacchus, who would tear up nonbelievers with their bare hands. And that was when they were in a *good* mood.

Percy voiced the question that she was too scared to ask. "What kind of tribute?"

Bacchus waved his hand dismissively. "Nothing *you* could handle, insolent Greek. But I will give you some free advice, since this girl does have *some* manners. Seek out Gaea's son, Phorcys. He always hated his mother, not that I can blame him. He didn't have much use for his siblings the twins, either. You'll find him in the city they named after that heroine—Atalanta."

Piper hesitated. “You mean Atlanta?”

“That’s the one.”

“But this Phorcys,” Jason said. “Is he a giant? A Titan?”

Bacchus laughed. “Neither. Seek out the salt water.”

“Salt water...” Percy said. “In Atlanta?”

“Yes,” Bacchus said. “Are you hard of hearing? If anyone can give you insight on Gaea and the twins, it’s Phorcys. Just watch out for him.”

“What do you mean?” Jason asked.

The god glanced at the sun, which had climbed almost to high noon. “It’s unlike Ceres to be late, unless she sensed something dangerous in this area. Or...”

The god’s face suddenly went slack. “Or a trap. Well, I must be going! And if I were you, I’d do the same!”

“Lord Bacchus, wait!” Jason protested.

The god shimmered and disappeared with a sound like a soda-can top being popped.

The wind rustled through the sunflowers. The horses paced in agitation. Despite the dry, hot day, Piper shivered. A cold feeling... Annabeth and Leo had both described a cold feeling...

“Bacchus is right,” she said. “We need to leave—”

Too late, said a sleepy voice, humming through the

fields all around them and resonating in the ground at Piper's feet.

Percy and Jason drew their swords. Piper stood on the road between them, frozen with fear. The power of Gaea was suddenly everywhere. The sunflowers turned to look at them. The wheat bent toward them like a million scythes.

Welcome to my party, Gaea murmured. Her voice reminded Piper of corn growing—a crackling, hissing, hot and persistent noise she used to hear at Grandpa Tom's on those quiet nights in Oklahoma.

What did Bacchus say? the goddess mocked. *A simple, low-key affair with organic snacks? Yes. For my snacks, I need only two: the blood of a female demigod, and the blood of a male. Piper, my dear, choose which hero will die with you.*

"Gaea!" Jason yelled. "Stop hiding in the wheat. Show yourself!"

Such bravado, Gaea hissed. *But the other one, Percy Jackson, also has appeal. Choose, Piper McLean, or I will.*

Piper's heart raced. Gaea meant to kill her. That was no surprise. But what was this about choosing one of the boys? Why would Gaea let either of them go? It had to be a trap.

"You're insane!" she shouted. "I'm not choosing anything for you!"

Suddenly Jason gasped. He sat up straight in his saddle.

“Jason!” Piper cried. “What’s wrong—?”

He looked down at her, his expression deadly calm. His eyes were no longer blue. They glowed solid gold.

“Percy, help!” Piper stumbled back from Tempest.

But Percy galloped away from them. He stopped thirty feet down the road and wheeled his pegasus around. He raised his sword and pointed the tip toward Jason.

“One will die,” Percy said, but the voice wasn’t his. It was deep and hollow, like someone whispering from inside the barrel of a cannon.

“I will choose,” Jason answered, in the same hollow voice.

“No!” Piper yelled.

All around her, the fields crackled and hissed, laughing in Gaea’s voice as Percy and Jason charged at each other, their weapons ready.

X I

PIPER

IF NOT FOR THE HORSES, PIPER WOULD'VE DIED.

Jason and Percy charged each other, but Tempest and Blackjack balked long enough for Piper to leap out of the way.

She rolled to the edge of the road and looked back, dazed and horrified, as the boys crossed swords, gold against bronze. Sparks flew. Their blades blurred—strike and parry—and the pavement trembled. The first exchange took only a second, but Piper couldn't believe the speed of their sword fighting. The horses pulled

away from each other—Tempest thundering in protest, Blackjack flapping his wings.

“Stop it!” Piper yelled.

For a moment, Jason heeded her voice. His golden eyes turned toward her, and Percy charged, slamming his blade into Jason. Thank the gods, Percy turned his sword—maybe on purpose, maybe accidentally—so the flat of it hit Jason’s chest; but the impact was still enough to knock Jason off his mount.

Blackjack cantered away as Tempest reared in confusion. The spirit horse charged into the sunflowers and dissipated into vapor.

Percy struggled to turn his pegasus around.

“Percy!” Piper yelled. “Jason’s your friend. Drop your weapon!”

Percy’s sword arm dipped. Piper might have been able to bring him under control, but unfortunately Jason got to his feet.

Jason roared. A bolt of lightning arced out of the clear blue sky. It ricocheted off his *gladius* and blasted Percy off his horse.

Blackjack whinnied and fled into the wheat fields. Jason charged at Percy, who was now on his back, his clothes smoking from the lightning blast.

For a horrible moment, Piper couldn’t find her voice. Gaea seemed to be whispering to her: *You must choose one. Why not let Jason kill him?*

“No!” she screamed. “Jason, stop!”

He froze, his sword six inches from Percy’s face.

Jason turned, the gold light in his eyes flickering uncertainly. *“I cannot stop. One must die.”*

Something about that voice...it wasn’t Gaea. It wasn’t Jason. Whoever it was spoke haltingly, as if English was its second language.

“Who are you?” Piper demanded.

Jason’s mouth twisted in a gruesome smile. *“We are the eidolons. We will live again.”*

“Eidolons... ?” Piper’s mind raced. She’d studied all sorts of monsters at Camp Half-Blood, but that term wasn’t familiar. “You’re—you’re some sort of ghost?”

“He must die.” Jason turned his attention back to Percy, but Percy had recovered more than either of them realized. He swept out his leg and knocked Jason off his feet.

Jason’s head hit the asphalt with a nauseating *conk*.

Percy rose.

“Stop it!” Piper screamed again, but there was no charmspeak in her voice. She was shouting in sheer desperation.

Percy raised Riptide over Jason’s chest.

Panic closed up Piper’s throat. She wanted to attack Percy with her dagger, but she knew that wouldn’t help. Whatever was controlling him had all of Percy’s skill. There was no way she could beat him in combat.

She forced herself to focus. She poured all of her anger into her voice. "Eidolon, stop."

Percy froze.

"Face me," Piper ordered.

The son of the sea god turned. His eyes were gold instead of green, his face pale and cruel, not at all like Percy's.

"You have not chosen," he said. "So this one will die."

"You're a spirit from the Underworld," Piper guessed. "You're possessing Percy Jackson. Is that it?"

Percy sneered. *"I will live again in this body. The Earth Mother has promised. I will go where I please, control whom I wish."*

A wave of cold washed over Piper. "Leo...that's what happened to Leo. He was being controlled by an eidolon."

The thing in Percy's form laughed without humor. *"Too late you realize. You can trust no one."*

Jason still wasn't moving. Piper had no help, no way to protect him.

Behind Percy, something rustled in the wheat. Piper saw the tip of a black wing, and Percy began to turn toward the sound.

"Ignore it!" she yelled. "Look at me."

Percy obeyed. *"You cannot stop me. I will kill Jason Grace."*

Behind him, Blackjack emerged from the wheat field, moving with surprising stealth for such a large animal.

“You won’t kill him,” Piper ordered. But she wasn’t looking at Percy. She locked eyes with the pegasus, pouring all her power into her words and hoping Blackjack would understand. “You will knock him out.”

The charmspeak washed over Percy. He shifted his weight indecisively. “*I... will knock him out?*”

“Oh, sorry.” Piper smiled. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

Blackjack reared and brought his hoof down on Percy’s head.

Percy crumpled to the pavement next to Jason.

“Oh, gods!” Piper ran to the boys. “Blackjack, you didn’t *kill* him, did you?”

The pegasus snorted. Piper couldn’t speak Horse, but she thought he might have said: *Please. I know my own strength.*

Tempest was nowhere to be seen. The lightning steed had apparently returned to wherever storm spirits live on clear days.

Piper checked on Jason. He was breathing steadily, but two knocks on the skull in two days couldn’t have been good for him. Then she examined Percy’s head. She didn’t see any blood, but a large knot was forming

where the horse had kicked him. “We have to get them both back to the ship,” she told Blackjack.

The pegasus bobbed his head in agreement. He knelt to the ground, so that Piper could drape Percy and Jason over his back. After a lot of hard work (unconscious boys were heavy), she got them reasonably secured, climbed onto Blackjack’s back herself, and they took off for the ship.

The others were a little surprised when Piper came back on a pegasus with two unconscious demigods. While Frank and Hazel tended to Blackjack, Annabeth and Leo helped get Piper and the boys to the sickbay.

“At this rate, we’re going to run out of ambrosia,” Coach Hedge grumbled as he tended their wounds. “How come I never get invited on these violent trips?”

Piper sat at Jason’s side. She herself felt fine after a swig of nectar and some water, but she was still worried about the boys.

“Leo,” Piper said, “are we ready to sail?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Set course for Atlanta. I’ll explain later.”

“But... okay.” He hurried off.

Annabeth didn’t argue with Piper either. She was too busy examining the horseshoe-shaped dent on the back of Percy’s head.

“What *hit* him?” she demanded.

“Blackjack,” Piper said.

“What?”

Piper tried to explain while Coach Hedge applied some healing paste to the boys’ heads. She’d never been impressed with Hedge’s nursing abilities before, but he must have done something right. Either that, or the spirits that possessed the boys had also made them extra resilient. They both groaned and opened their eyes.

Within a few minutes, Jason and Percy were sitting up in their berths and able to talk in complete sentences. Both had fuzzy memories of what had happened. When Piper described their duel on the highway, Jason winced.

“Knocked out twice in two days,” he muttered. “Some demigod.” He glanced sheepishly at Percy. “Sorry, man. I didn’t mean to blast you.”

Percy’s shirt was peppered with burn holes. His hair was even more disheveled than normal. Despite that, he managed a weak laugh. “Not the first time. Your big sister got me good once at camp.”

“Yeah, but...I could have killed you.”

“Or I could have killed you,” Percy said.

Jason shrugged. “If there’d been an ocean in Kansas, maybe.”

“I don’t need an ocean—”

“Boys,” Annabeth interrupted, “I’m sure you both

would've been wonderful at killing each other. But right now, you need some rest."

"Food first," Percy said. "Please? And we really need to talk. Bacchus said some things that don't—"

"Bacchus?" Annabeth raised her hand. "Okay, fine. We need to talk. Mess hall. Ten minutes. I'll tell the others. And please, Percy...change your clothes. You smell like you've been run over by an electric horse."

Leo gave the helm to Coach Hedge again, after making the satyr promise he would not steer them to the nearest military base "for fun."

They gathered around the dining table, and Piper explained what had happened at TOPEKA 32—their conversation with Bacchus, the trap sprung by Gaea, the eidolons that had possessed the boys.

"Of course!" Hazel slapped the table, which startled Frank so much, he dropped his burrito. "That's what happened to Leo too."

"So it wasn't my fault," Leo exhaled. "I didn't start World War Three. I just got possessed by an evil spirit. That's a relief!"

"But the Romans don't know that," Annabeth said. "And why would they take our word for it?"

"We could contact Reyna," Jason suggested. "She would believe us."

Hearing the way Jason said her name, like it was a

lifeline to his past, made Piper's heart sink.

Jason turned to her with a hopeful gleam in his eyes. "You could convince her, Pipes. I know you could."

Piper felt like all the blood in her body was draining into her feet. Annabeth looked at her sympathetically, as if to say: *Boys are so clueless*. Even Hazel winced.

"I could try," she said halfheartedly. "But Octavian is the one we have to worry about. In my dagger blade, I saw him taking control of the Roman crowd. I'm not sure Reyna can stop him."

Jason's expression darkened. Piper didn't get any pleasure from bursting his bubble, but the other Romans—Hazel and Frank—nodded in agreement.

"She's right," Frank said. "This afternoon when we were scouting, we saw eagles again. They were a long way off, but closing fast. Octavian is on the warpath."

Hazel grimaced. "This is exactly the sort of opportunity Octavian has always wanted. He'll try to seize power. If Reyna objects, he'll say she's soft on the Greeks. As for those eagles...It's like they could smell us."

"They can," Jason said. "Roman eagles can hunt demigods by their magical scent even better than monsters can. This ship might conceal us somewhat, but not completely—not from them."

Leo drummed his fingers. "Great. I should have installed a smoke screen that makes the ship smell like a giant chicken nugget. Remind me to invent that, next time."

Hazel frowned. "What is a chicken nugget?"

"Oh, man..." Leo shook his head in amazement. "That's right. You've missed the last like, seventy years. Well, my apprentice, a chicken nugget—"

"Doesn't matter," Annabeth interrupted. "The point is, we'll have a hard time explaining the truth to the Romans. Even if they believe us—"

"You're right." Jason leaned forward. "We should just keep going. Once we're over the Atlantic, we'll be safe—at least from the legion."

He sounded so depressed, Piper didn't know whether to feel sorry for him or resentful. "How can you be sure?" she asked. "Why wouldn't they follow us?"

He shook his head. "You heard Reyna talking about the ancient lands. They're much too dangerous. Roman demigods have been forbidden to go there for generations. Even Octavian couldn't get around that rule."

Frank swallowed a bite of burrito like it had turned to cardboard in his mouth. "So, if *we* go there..."

"We'll be outlaws as well as traitors," Jason confirmed. "Any Roman demigod would have the right

to kill us on sight. But I wouldn't worry about that. If we get across the Atlantic, they'll give up on chasing us. They'll assume that we'll die in the Mediterranean—the Mare Nostrum.”

Percy pointed his pizza slice at Jason. “You, sir, are a ray of sunshine.”

Jason didn't argue. The other demigods stared at their plates, except for Percy, who continued to enjoy his pizza. Where he put all that food, Piper didn't know. The guy could eat like a satyr.

“So let's plan ahead,” Percy suggested, “and make sure we *don't* die. Mr. D—Bacchus— Ugh, do I have to call him Mr. *B* now? Anyway, he mentioned the twins in Ella's prophecy. Two giants. Otis and, uh, something that started with an F?”

“Ephialtes,” Jason said.

“Twin giants, like Piper saw in her blade...” Annabeth ran her finger along the rim of her cup. “I remember a story about twin giants. They tried to reach Mount Olympus by piling up a bunch of mountains.”

Frank nearly choked. “Well, that's great. Giants who can use mountains like building blocks. And you say Bacchus killed these guys with a pinecone on a stick?”

“Something like that,” Percy said. “I don't think we should count on his help this time. He wanted a tribute, and he made it pretty clear it would be a tribute we

couldn't handle."

Silence fell around the table. Piper could hear Coach Hedge above deck singing "Blow the Man Down," except he didn't know the lyrics, so he mostly sang, "Blah-blah-hum-de-dum-dum."

Piper couldn't shake the feeling that Bacchus was *meant* to help them. The giant twins were in Rome. They were keeping something the demigods needed—something in that bronze jar. Whatever it was, she got the feeling it held the answer to sealing the Doors of Death—the *key to endless death*. She also felt sure they could never defeat the giants without Bacchus's help. And if they couldn't do that in five days, Rome would be destroyed, and Hazel's brother, Nico, would die.

On the other hand, if the vision of Bacchus offering her a silver goblet was false, maybe the other visions didn't have to come true either—especially the one of her, Percy, and Jason drowning. Maybe that was just symbolic.

The blood of a female demigod, Gaea had said, and the blood of a male. Piper, my dear, choose which hero will die with you.

"She wants two of us," Piper murmured.

Everyone turned to look at her.

Piper hated being the center of attention. Maybe that was strange for a child of Aphrodite, but she'd watched her dad, the movie star, deal with fame for

years. She remembered when Aphrodite had claimed her at the bonfire in front of the entire camp, zapping her with a magic beauty-queen makeover. That had been the most embarrassing moment of her life. Even here, with only six other demigods, Piper felt exposed.

They're my friends, she told herself. It's okay.

But she had a strange feeling...as if more than six sets of eyes were watching her.

"Today on the highway," she said, "Gaea told me that she needed the blood of only two demigods—one female, one male. She—she asked me to choose which boy would die."

Jason squeezed her hand. "But neither of us died. You saved us."

"I know. It's just... Why would she want that?"

Leo whistled softly. "Guys, remember at the Wolf House? Our favorite ice princess, Khione? She talked about spilling Jason's blood, how it would taint the place for generations. Maybe demigod blood has some kind of power."

"Oh..." Percy set down his third pizza slice. He leaned back and stared at nothing, as if the horse kick to his head had just now registered.

"Percy?" Annabeth gripped his arm.

"Oh, bad," he muttered. "Bad. Bad." He looked across the table at Frank and Hazel. "You guys remember Polybotes?"

“The giant who invaded Camp Jupiter,” Hazel said. “The anti-Poseidon you whacked in the head with a Terminus statue. Yes, I think I remember.”

“I had a dream,” Percy said, “when we were flying to Alaska. Polybotes was talking to the gorgons, and he said—he said he wanted me taken prisoner, not killed. He said: ‘I want that one chained at my feet, so I can kill him when the time is ripe. His blood shall water the stones of Mount Olympus and wake Earth Mother!’”

Piper wondered if the room’s temperature controls were broken, because suddenly she couldn’t stop shaking. It was the same way she’d felt on the highway outside Topeka. “You think the giants would use our blood... the blood of two of us—”

“I don’t know,” Percy said. “But until we figure it out, I suggest we all try to avoid getting captured.”

Jason grunted. “*That* I agree with.”

“But how do we figure it out?” Hazel asked. “The Mark of Athena, the twins, Ella’s prophecy... how does it all fit together?”

Annabeth pressed her hands against the edge of the table. “Piper, you told Leo to set our course for Atlanta.”

“Right,” Piper said. “Bacchus told us we should seek out... what was his name?”

“Phorcys,” Percy said.

Annabeth looked surprised, like she wasn’t used to

her boyfriend having the answers. “You know him?”

Percy shrugged. “I didn’t recognize the name at first. Then Bacchus mentioned salt water, and it rang a bell. Phorcys is an old sea god from before my dad’s time. Never met him, but supposedly he’s a son of Gaea. I still don’t understand what a sea god would be doing in Atlanta.”

Leo snorted. “What’s a wine god doing in Kansas? Gods are weird. Anyway, we should reach Atlanta by noon tomorrow, unless something *else* goes wrong.”

“Don’t even say that,” Annabeth muttered. “It’s getting late. We should all get some sleep.”

“Wait,” Piper said.

Once more, everyone looked at her.

She was rapidly losing her courage, wondering if her instincts were wrong, but she forced herself to speak.

“There’s one last thing,” she said. “The eidolons—the possessing spirits. They’re still here, in this room.”

X I I

PIPER

PIPER COULDN'T EXPLAIN HOW SHE KNEW.

Stories of phantoms and tortured souls had always freaked her out. Her dad used to joke about Grandpa Tom's Cherokee legends from back on the rez, but even at home in their big Malibu mansion, looking out over the Pacific, whenever her dad recounted the ghost stories for her, she could never get them out of her head.

Cherokee spirits were always restless. They often lost their way to the Land of the Dead, or stayed behind

with the living out of sheer stubbornness. Sometimes they didn't even realize they *were* dead.

The more Piper learned about being a demigod, the more convinced she was that Cherokee legends and Greek myths weren't so different. These eidolons acted a lot like the spirits in her dad's stories.

Piper had a gut sense they were still present, simply because no one had told them to go away.

When she was done explaining, the others looked at her uncomfortably. Up on deck, Hedge sang something that sounded like "In the Navy" while Blackjack stomped his hooves, whinnying in protest.

Finally Hazel exhaled. "Piper is right."

"How can you be sure?" Annabeth asked.

"I've met eidolons," Hazel said. "In the Underworld, when I was... you know."

Dead.

Piper had forgotten that Hazel was a second-timer. In her own way, Hazel too was a ghost reborn.

"So..." Frank rubbed his hand across his buzz-cut hair as if some ghosts might have invaded his scalp. "You think these things are lurking on the ship, or—"

"Possibly lurking inside some of us," Piper said. "We don't know."

Jason clenched his fist. "If that's true—"

"We have to take steps," Piper said. "I think I can do this."

“Do what?” Percy asked.

“Just listen, okay?” Piper took a deep breath.

“Everybody listen.”

Piper met their eyes, one person at a time.

“Eidolons,” she said, using her charmspeak, “raise your hands.”

There was tense silence.

Leo laughed nervously. “Did you really think that was going to—?”

His voice died. His face went slack. He raised his hand.

Jason and Percy did the same. Their eyes had turned glassy and gold. Hazel caught her breath. Next to Leo, Frank scrambled out of his chair and put his back against the wall.

“Oh, gods.” Annabeth looked at Piper imploringly. “Can you cure them?”

Piper wanted to whimper and hide under the table, but she *had* to help Jason. She couldn’t believe she’d held hands with... No, she refused to think about it.

She focused on Leo because he was the least intimidating.

“Are there more of you on this ship?” she asked.

“No,” Leo said in a hollow voice. “*The Earth Mother sent three. The strongest, the best. We will live again.*”

“Not here, you won’t,” Piper growled. “All three of

you, listen carefully.”

Jason and Percy turned toward her. Those gold eyes were unnerving, but seeing all three boys like that fueled Piper’s anger.

“You will leave those bodies,” she commanded.

“No,” Percy said.

Leo let out a soft hiss. “*We must live.*”

Frank fumbled for his bow. “Mars Almighty, that’s creepy! Get out of here, spirits! Leave our friends alone!”

Leo turned toward him. “*You cannot command us, child of war. Your own life is fragile. Your soul could burn at any moment.*”

Piper wasn’t sure what that meant, but Frank staggered like he’d been punched in the gut. He drew an arrow, his hands shaking. “I—I’ve faced down worse things than you. If you want a fight—”

“Frank, don’t.” Hazel rose.

Next to her, Jason drew his sword.

“Stop!” Piper ordered, but her voice quavered. She was rapidly losing faith in her plan. She’d made the eidolons appear, but what now? If she couldn’t persuade them to leave, any bloodshed would be her fault. In the back of her mind, she could almost hear Gaea laughing.

“Listen to Piper.” Hazel pointed at Jason’s sword. The gold blade seemed to grow heavy in his hand. It

clunked to the table and Jason sank back into his chair.

Percy growled in a very un-Percy-like way. *“Daughter of Pluto, you may control gems and metals. You do not control the dead.”*

Annabeth reached toward him as if to restrain him, but Hazel waved her off.

“Listen, eidolons,” Hazel said sternly, “you do not belong here. I may not command you, but Piper does. Obey her.”

She turned toward Piper, her expression clear: *Try again. You can do this.*

Piper mustered all her courage. She looked straight at Jason—straight into the eyes of the thing that was controlling him. “You will leave those bodies,” Piper repeated, even more forcefully.

Jason’s face tightened. His forehead beaded with sweat. *“We—we will leave these bodies.”*

“You will vow on the River Styx never to return to this ship,” Piper continued, “and never to possess any member of this crew.”

Leo and Percy both hissed in protest.

“You will promise on the River Styx,” Piper insisted.

A moment of tension—she could feel their wills fighting against hers. Then all three eidolons spoke in unison: *“We promise on the River Styx.”*

“You are dead,” Piper said.

"We are dead," they agreed.

"Now, leave."

All three boys slumped forward. Percy fell face-first into his pizza.

"Percy!" Annabeth grabbed him.

Piper and Hazel caught Jason's arms as he slipped out of his chair.

Leo wasn't so lucky. He fell toward Frank, who made no attempt to intercept him. Leo hit the floor.

"Ow!" he groaned.

"Are you all right?" Hazel asked.

Leo pulled himself up. He had a piece of spaghetti in the shape of a 3 stuck to his forehead. "Did it work?"

"It worked," Piper said, feeling pretty sure she was right. "I don't think they'll be back."

Jason blinked. "Does that mean I can stop getting head injuries now?"

Piper laughed, exhaling all her nervousness. "Come on, Lightning Boy. Let's get you some fresh air."

Piper and Jason walked back and forth along the deck. Jason was still wobbly, so Piper encouraged him to wrap his arm around her for support.

Leo stood at the helm, conferring with Festus through the intercom; he knew from experience to give Jason and Piper some space. Since the satellite TV was up again, Coach Hedge was in his cabin happily

catching up on his mixed martial arts cage matches. Percy's pegasus Blackjack had flown off somewhere. The other demigods were settling in for the night.

The *Argo II* raced east, cruising several hundred feet above the ground. Below them small towns passed by like lit-up islands in a dark sea of prairie.

Piper remembered last winter, flying Festus the dragon over the city of Quebec. She had never seen anything so beautiful, or felt so happy to have Jason's arms around her—but this was even better.

The night was warm. The ship sailed along more smoothly than a dragon. Best of all, they were flying away from Camp Jupiter as fast as they possibly could. No matter how dangerous the ancient lands were, Piper couldn't wait to get there. She hoped Jason was right that the Romans wouldn't follow them across the Atlantic.

Jason stopped amidships and leaned against the rail. The moonlight turned his blond hair silver.

"Thanks, Pipes," he said. "You saved me again."

He put his arm around her waist. She thought about the day they'd fallen into the Grand Canyon—the first time she'd learned that Jason could control the air. He'd held her so tightly, she could feel his heartbeat. Then they'd stopped falling and floated in midair. Best. Boyfriend. Ever.

She wanted to kiss him now, but something held

her back.

"I don't know if Percy will trust me anymore," she said. "Not after I let his horse knock him out."

Jason laughed. "Don't worry about that. Percy's a nice guy, but I get the feeling he needs a knock on the head every once in a while."

"You could have killed him."

Jason's smile faded. "That wasn't me."

"But I almost *let* you," Piper said. "When Gaea said I had to choose, I hesitated and..."

She blinked, cursing herself for crying.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Jason said. "You saved us both."

"But if two of our crew really have to die, a boy and a girl—"

"I don't accept that. We're going to stop Gaea. All seven of us are going to come back alive. I promise you."

Piper wished that he hadn't *promised*. The word only reminded her of the Prophecy of Seven: *an oath to keep with a final breath*.

Please, she thought, wondering if her mom, the goddess of love, could hear her. *Don't let it be Jason's final breath. If love means anything, don't take him away.*

As soon as she had made the wish, she felt guilty. How could she stand to see Annabeth in that kind of

pain if Percy died? How could she live with herself if *any* of the seven demigods died? Already, each of them had endured so much. Even the two new Roman kids, Hazel and Frank, whom Piper barely knew, felt like kin. At Camp Jupiter, Percy had recounted their trip to Alaska, which sounded as harrowing as anything Piper had experienced. And from the way Hazel and Frank tried to help during the exorcism, she could tell they were brave, good people.

“The legend that Annabeth mentioned,” she said, “about the Mark of Athena...why didn’t you want to talk about it?”

She was afraid Jason might shut her out, but he just lowered his head like he’d been expecting the question. “Piper, I don’t know what’s true and what’s not. That legend...it could be really dangerous.”

“For who?”

“All of us,” he said grimly. “The story goes that the Romans stole something important from the Greeks, back in ancient times, when the Romans conquered the Greeks’ cities.”

Piper waited, but Jason seemed lost in thought.

“What did they steal?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’m not sure anyone in the legion has ever known. But according to the story, this thing was taken away to Rome and hidden there. The children of Athena, Greek demigods, have hated us

ever since. They've always stirred up their brethren against the Romans. Like I said, I don't know how much of that is true—"

"But why not just tell Annabeth?" Piper asked. "She's not going to suddenly hate you."

He seemed to have trouble focusing on her. "I hope not. But the legend says that the children of Athena have been searching for this thing for millennia. Every generation, a few are chosen by the goddess to find it. Apparently, they're led to Rome by some sign...the Mark of Athena."

"If Annabeth is one of those searchers...we should help her."

Jason hesitated. "Maybe. When we get closer to Rome, I'll tell her what little I know. Honest. But the story, at least the way I heard it—it claims that if the Greeks ever found what was stolen, they'd never forgive us. They'd destroy the legion and Rome, once and for all. After what Nemesis told Leo, about Rome's being destroyed five days from now..."

Piper studied Jason's face. He was, without a doubt, the bravest person she'd ever known, but she realized he was afraid. This legend—the idea that it might tear apart their group and level a city—absolutely terrified him.

Piper wondered what could have been stolen from the Greeks that would be so important. She couldn't

imagine anything that would make Annabeth suddenly turn vengeful.

Then again, Piper couldn't imagine choosing one demigod's life over another, and today on that deserted road, just for a moment, Gaea had almost tempted her.

...

"I'm sorry, by the way," Jason said.

Piper wiped the last tear from her face. "Sorry for what? It was the eidolon who attacked—"

"Not about that." The little scar on Jason's upper lip seemed to glow white in the moonlight. She'd always loved that scar. The imperfection made his face much more interesting.

"I was stupid to ask you to contact Reyna," he said. "I wasn't thinking."

"Oh." Piper looked up at the clouds and wondered if her mother, Aphrodite, was somehow influencing him. His apology seemed too good to be true.

But don't stop, she thought. "Really, it's okay."

"It's just...I never felt that way toward Reyna," Jason said, "so I didn't think about its making you uncomfortable. You've got nothing to worry about, Pipes."

"I wanted to hate her," Piper admitted. "I was so afraid you'd go back to Camp Jupiter."

Jason looked surprised. "That would never happen. Not unless you came with me. I promise."

Piper held his hand. She managed a smile, but she was thinking: Another promise. *An oath to keep with a final breath.*

She tried to put those thoughts out of her mind. She knew she should just enjoy this quiet moment with Jason. But as she looked over the side of the ship, she couldn't help remembering how much the prairie at night looked like dark water—like the drowning room she'd seen in the blade of her knife.

X I I I

PERCY

FORGET THE CHICKEN-NUGGET SMOKE SCREEN. Percy wanted Leo to invent an anti-dream hat.

That night he had horrible nightmares. First he dreamed he was back in Alaska on the quest for the legion's eagle. He was hiking along a mountain road, but as soon as he stepped off the shoulder he was swallowed by the bog—muskeg, Hazel had called it. He found himself choking in mud, unable to move or see or breathe. For the first time in his life, he understood what it was like to drown.

It's just a dream, he told himself. I'll wake up.

But that didn't make it any less terrifying.

Percy had never been scared of water. It was his father's element. But since the muskeg experience, he'd developed a fear of suffocation. He could never admit this to anyone, but it had even made him nervous about going in the water. He knew that was silly. He couldn't drown. But he also suspected that if he didn't control the fear, it might start controlling him.

He thought about his friend Thalia, who was scared of heights even though she was the daughter of the sky god. Her brother, Jason, could fly by summoning the winds. Thalia couldn't, maybe because she was too afraid to try. If Percy started to believe he could drown...

The muskeg pressed against his chest. His lungs wanted to burst.

Stop panicking, he told himself. This isn't real.

Just when he couldn't hold his breath any longer, the dream changed.

He stood in a vast gloomy space like an underground parking garage. Rows of stone pillars marched off in every direction, holding up the ceiling about twenty feet above. Freestanding braziers cast a dim red glow over the floor.

Percy couldn't see very far in the shadows, but hanging from the ceiling were pulley systems,

sandbags, and rows of dark theater lights. Piled around the chamber, wooden crates were labeled PROPS, WEAPONS, and COSTUMES. One read: ASSORTED ROCKET LAUNCHERS.

Percy heard machinery creaking in the darkness, huge gears turning, and water rushing through pipes.

Then he saw the giant...or at least Percy guessed that he was a giant.

He was about twelve feet tall—a respectable height for a Cyclops, but only half as tall as other giants Percy had dealt with. He also looked more human than a typical giant, without the dragonlike legs of his larger kin. Nevertheless, his long purple hair was braided in a ponytail of dreadlocks, woven with gold and silver coins, which struck Percy as a giantish hairstyle. He had a ten-foot spear strapped to his back—a giantish weapon.

He wore the largest black turtleneck Percy had ever seen, black pants, and black leather shoes with points so long and curly, they might have been jester slippers. He paced back and forth in front of a raised platform, examining a bronze jar about the size of Percy.

“No, no, no,” the giant muttered to himself. “Where’s the splash? Where’s the value?” He yelled into the darkness, “Otis!”

Percy heard something shuffling in the distance. Another giant appeared out of the gloom. He wore

exactly the same black outfit, right down to the curly shoes. The only difference between the two giants was that the second one's hair was green rather than purple.

The first giant cursed. "Otis, why do you do this to me *every day*? I told you *I was wearing the black turtleneck today*. You could wear anything but the black turtleneck!"

Otis blinked as if he'd just woken up. "I thought you were wearing the yellow toga today."

"That was yesterday! When *you* showed up in the yellow toga!"

"Oh. Right. Sorry, Ephie."

His brother snarled. They had to be twins, because their faces were identically ugly.

"And don't call me Ephie," Ephie demanded. "Call me *Ephialtes*. That's my name. Or you can use my stage name: The BIG F!"

Otis grimaced. "I'm still not sure about that stage name."

"Nonsense! It's perfect. Now, how are the preparations coming along?"

"Fine." Otis didn't sound very enthusiastic. "The man-eating tigers, the spinning blades... But I still think a few ballerinas would be nice."

"No ballerinas!" Ephialtes snapped. "And *this* thing." He waved at the bronze jar in disgust. "What does it do? It's not exciting."

“But that’s the whole point of the show. He dies unless the others rescue him. And if they arrive on schedule—”

“Oh, they’d better!” Ephialtes said. “July First, the Kalends of July, sacred to Juno. That’s when Mother wants to destroy those stupid demigods and *really* rub it in Juno’s face. Besides, I’m not paying overtime for those gladiator ghosts!”

“Well, then, they all die,” Otis said, “and we start the destruction of Rome. Just like Mother wants. It’ll be perfect. The crowd will love it. Roman ghosts adore this sort of thing.”

Ephialtes looked unconvinced. “But the jar just *stands* there. Couldn’t we suspend it above a fire, or dissolve it in a pool of acid or something?”

“We need him alive for a few more days,” Otis reminded his brother. “Otherwise, the seven won’t take the bait and rush to save him.”

“Hmm. I suppose. I’d still like a little more screaming. This slow death is boring. Ah, well, what about our talented friend? Is she ready to receive her visitor?”

Otis made a sour face. “I *really* don’t like talking to her. She makes me nervous.”

“But is she ready?”

“Yes,” Otis said reluctantly. “She’s been ready for centuries. No one will be removing *that* statue.”

“Excellent.” Ephialtes rubbed his hands together in anticipation. “This is our big chance, my brother.”

“That’s what you said about our last stunt,” Otis mumbled. “I was hanging in that block of ice suspended over the River Lethe for six months, and we didn’t even get any media attention.”

“This is different!” Ephialtes insisted. “We will set a new standard for entertainment! If Mother is pleased, we can write our own ticket to fame and fortune!”

“If you say so,” Otis sighed. “Though I still think those ballerina costumes from *Swan Lake* would look lovely—”

“No ballet!”

“Sorry.”

“Come,” Ephialtes said. “Let’s examine the tigers. I want to be sure they are hungry!”

The giants lumbered off into the gloom, and Percy turned toward the jar.

I need to see inside, he thought.

He willed his dream forward, right to the surface of the jar. Then he passed through.

The air in the jar smelled of stale breath and tarnished metal. The only light came from the dim purple glow of a dark sword, its Stygian iron blade set against one side of the container. Huddled next to it was a dejected-looking boy in tattered jeans, a black shirt, and an old aviator jacket. On his right hand, a

silver skull ring glittered.

“Nico,” Percy called. But the son of Hades couldn’t hear him.

The container was completely sealed. The air was turning poisonous. Nico’s eyes were closed, his breathing shallow. He appeared to be meditating. His face was pale, and thinner than Percy remembered.

On the inner wall of the jar, it looked as though Nico had scratched three hash marks with his sword—maybe it had been three days that he’d been imprisoned?

It didn’t seem possible he could have survived so long without suffocating. Even in a dream, Percy was already starting to feel panicky, struggling to get enough oxygen.

Then he noticed something between Nico’s feet—a small collection of glistening objects no bigger than baby teeth.

Seeds, Percy realized. Pomegranate seeds. Three had been eaten and spit out. Five were still encased in dark red pulp.

“Nico,” Percy said, “where is this place? We’ll save you...”

The image faded, and a girl’s voice whispered: “Percy.”

At first, Percy thought he was still asleep. When he’d lost his memory, he’d spent weeks dreaming about

Annabeth, the only person he remembered from his past. As his eyes opened and his vision cleared, he realized she was really there.

She was standing by his berth, smiling down at him.

Her blond hair fell across her shoulders. Her storm-gray eyes were bright with amusement. He remembered his first day at Camp Half-Blood, five years ago, when he'd woken from a daze and found Annabeth standing over him. She had said, *You drool when you sleep.*

She was sentimental that way.

"Wh—what's going on?" he asked. "Are we there?"

"No," she said, her voice low. "It's the middle of the night."

"You mean..." Percy's heart started to race. He realized he was in his pajamas, in bed. He probably *had* been drooling, or at least making weird noises as he dreamed. No doubt he had a severe case of pillow hair and his breath didn't smell great. "You sneaked into my cabin?"

Annabeth rolled her eyes. "Percy, you'll be seventeen in two months. You can't seriously be worried about getting into trouble with Coach Hedge."

"Uh, have you seen his baseball bat?"

"Besides, Seaweed Brain, I just thought we could take a walk. We haven't had any time to be together

alone. I want to show you something—my favorite place aboard the ship.”

Percy’s pulse was still in overdrive, but it wasn’t from fear of getting into trouble. “Can I, you know, brush my teeth first?”

“You’d better,” Annabeth said. “Because I’m not kissing you until you do. And brush your hair while you’re at it.”

For a trireme, the ship was huge, but it still felt cozy to Percy—like his dorm building back at Yancy Academy, or any of the other boarding schools he’d gotten kicked out of. Annabeth and he crept downstairs to the second deck, which Percy hadn’t explored except for sickbay.

She led him past the engine room, which looked like a very dangerous, mechanized jungle gym, with pipes and pistons and tubes jutting from a central bronze sphere. Cables resembling giant metal noodles snaked across the floor and ran up the walls.

“How does that thing even work?” Percy asked.

“No idea,” Annabeth said. “And I’m the only one besides Leo who can operate it.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“It should be fine. It’s only threatened to blow up once.”

“You’re kidding, I hope.”

She smiled. "Come on."

They worked their way past the supply rooms and the armory. Toward the stern of the ship, they reached a set of wooden double doors that opened into a large stable. The room smelled of fresh hay and wool blankets. Lining the left wall were three empty horse stalls like the ones they used for pegasi back at camp. The right wall had two empty cages big enough for large zoo animals.

In the center of the floor was a twenty-foot-square see-through panel. Far below, the night landscape whisked by—miles of dark countryside crisscrossed with illuminated highways like the strands of a web.

"A glass-bottomed boat?" Percy asked.

Annabeth grabbed a blanket from the nearest stable gate and spread it across part of the glass floor. "Sit with me."

They relaxed on the blanket as if they were having a picnic, and watched the world go by below.

"Leo built the stables so pegasi could come and go easily," Annabeth said. "Only he didn't realize that pegasi prefer to roam free, so the stables are always empty."

Percy wondered where Blackjack was—roaming the skies somewhere, hopefully following their progress. Percy's head still throbbed from getting whopped by Blackjack's hoof, but he didn't hold that

against the horse.

“What do you mean, *come and go easily*?” he asked. “Wouldn’t a pegasus have to make it down two flights of stairs?”

Annabeth rapped her knuckles on the glass. “These are bay doors, like on a bomber.”

Percy gulped. “You mean we’re sitting on *doors*? What if they opened?”

“I suppose we’d fall to our deaths. But they won’t open. Most likely.”

“Great.”

Annabeth laughed. “You know why I like it here? It’s not just the view. What does this place remind you of?”

Percy looked around: the cages and stables, the Celestial bronze lamp hanging from the beam, the smell of hay, and of course Annabeth sitting close to him, her face ghostly and beautiful in the soft amber light.

“That zoo truck,” Percy decided. “The one we took to Las Vegas.”

Her smile told him he’d gotten the answer right.

“That was so long ago,” Percy said. “We were in bad shape, struggling to get across the country to find that stupid lightning bolt, trapped in a truck with a bunch of mistreated animals. How can you be nostalgic for that?”

“Because, Seaweed Brain, it’s the first time we

really talked, you and me. I told you about my family, and..." She took out her camp necklace, strung with her dad's college ring and a colorful clay bead for each year at Camp Half-Blood. Now there was something else on the leather cord: a red coral pendant Percy had given her when they had started dating. He'd brought it from his father's palace at the bottom of the sea.

"And," Annabeth continued, "it reminds me how long we've known each other. We were *twelve*, Percy. Can you believe that?"

"No," he admitted. "So...you knew you liked me from that moment?"

She smirked. "I hated you at first. You annoyed me. Then I tolerated you for a few years. Then—"

"Okay, fine."

She leaned over and kissed him: a good, proper kiss without anyone watching—no Romans anywhere, no screaming satyr chaperones.

She pulled away. "I missed you, Percy."

Percy wanted to tell her the same thing, but it seemed too small a comment. While he had been on the Roman side, he'd kept himself alive almost solely by thinking of Annabeth. *I missed you* didn't really cover that.

He remembered earlier in the night, when Piper had forced the eidolon to leave his mind. Percy hadn't been aware of its presence until she had used her

charmspeak. After the eidolon was gone, he felt as if a hot spike had been removed from his forehead. He hadn't realized how much pain he had been in until the spirit left. Then his thoughts became clearer. His soul settled comfortably back into his body.

Sitting here with Annabeth made him feel the same way. The past few months could have been one of his strange dreams. The events at Camp Jupiter seemed as fuzzy and unreal as that fight with Jason, when they had both been controlled by the eidolons.

Yet he didn't regret the time he'd spent at Camp Jupiter. It had opened his eyes in a lot of ways.

"Annabeth," he said hesitantly, "in New Rome, demigods can live their whole lives in peace."

Her expression turned guarded. "Reyna explained it to me. But, Percy, you belong at Camp Half-Blood. That other life—"

"I know," Percy said. "But while I was there, I saw so many demigods living without fear: kids going to college, couples getting married and raising families. There's nothing like that at Camp Half-Blood. I kept thinking about you and me... and maybe someday when this war with the giants is over..."

It was hard to tell in the golden light, but he thought Annabeth was blushing. "Oh," she said.

Percy was afraid he'd said too much. Maybe he'd scared her with his big dreams of the future. She was

usually the one with the plans. Percy cursed himself silently.

As long as he'd known Annabeth, he still felt like he understood so little about her. Even after they'd been dating several months, their relationship had always felt new and delicate, like a glass sculpture. He was terrified of doing something wrong and breaking it.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I just...I had to think of that to keep going. To give me hope. Forget I mentioned—"

"No!" she said. "No, Percy. Gods, that's so sweet. It's just...we may have burned that bridge. If we can't repair things with the Romans—well, the two sets of demigods have *never* gotten along. That's why the gods kept us separate. I don't know if we could ever belong there."

Percy didn't want to argue, but he couldn't let go of the hope. It felt important—not just for Annabeth and him, but for all the other demigods. It *had* to be possible to belong in two different worlds at once. After all, that's what being a demigod was all about—not quite belonging in the mortal world or on Mount Olympus, but trying to make peace with both sides of their nature.

Unfortunately, that got him thinking about the gods, the war they were facing, and his dream about the twins Ephialtes and Otis.

"I was having a nightmare when you woke me up,"

he admitted.

He told Annabeth what he'd seen.

Even the most troubling parts didn't seem to surprise her. She shook her head sadly when he described Nico's imprisonment in the bronze jar. She got an angry glint in her eyes when he told her about the giants planning some sort of Rome-destroying extravaganza that would include their painful deaths as the opening event.

"Nico is the bait," she murmured. "Gaea's forces must have captured him somehow. But we don't know exactly where they're holding him."

"Somewhere in Rome," Percy said. "Somewhere underground. They made it sound like Nico still had a few days to live, but I don't see how he could hold out so long with no oxygen."

"Five more days, according to Nemesis," Annabeth said. "The Kalends of July. At least the deadline makes sense now."

"What's a Kalends?"

Annabeth smirked, like she was pleased they were back in their old familiar pattern—Percy being ignorant, she herself explaining stuff. "It's just the Roman term for the first of the month. That's where we get the word *calendar*. But how can Nico survive that long? We should talk to Hazel."

"Now?"

She hesitated. “No. It can wait until morning. I don’t want to hit her with this news in the middle of the night.”

“The giants mentioned a statue,” Percy recalled. “And something about a talented friend who was guarding it. Whoever this friend was, she scared Otis. Anyone who can scare a giant...”

Annabeth gazed down at a highway snaking through dark hills. “Percy, have you seen Poseidon lately? Or had any kind of sign from him?”

He shook his head. “Not since... Wow. I guess I haven’t thought about it. Not since the end of the Titan War. I saw him at Camp Half-Blood, but that was last August.” A sense of dread settled over him. “Why? Have you seen Athena?”

She didn’t meet his eyes.

“A few weeks ago,” she admitted. “It... it wasn’t good. She didn’t seem like herself. Maybe it’s the Greek/Roman schizophrenia that Nemesis described. I’m not sure. She said some hurtful things. She said I had failed her.”

“Failed her?” Percy wasn’t sure he’d heard her right. Annabeth was the *perfect* demigod child. She was everything a daughter of Athena should be. “How could you ever—?”

“I don’t know,” she said miserably. “On top of that, I’ve been having nightmares of my own. They don’t

make as much sense as yours.”

Percy waited, but Annabeth didn’t share any more details. He wanted to make her feel better and tell her it would be okay, but he knew he couldn’t. He wanted to fix everything for both of them so they could have a happy ending. After all these years, even the cruelest gods would have to admit they deserved it.

But he had a gut feeling that there was nothing he could do to help Annabeth this time, other than simply *be there. Wisdom’s daughter walks alone.*

He felt as trapped and helpless as when he’d sunk into the muskeg.

Annabeth managed a faint smile. “Some romantic evening, huh? No more bad things until the morning.” She kissed him again. “We’ll figure everything out. I’ve got you back. For now, that’s all that matters.”

“Right,” Percy said. “No more talk about Gaea rising, Nico being held hostage, the world ending, the giants—”

“Shut up, Seaweed Brain,” she ordered. “Just hold me for a while.”

They sat together cuddling, enjoying each other’s warmth. Before Percy knew it, the drone of the ship’s engine, the dim light, and the comfortable feeling of being with Annabeth made his eyes heavy, and he drifted to sleep.

When he woke, daylight was coming through the

glass floor, and a boy's voice said, "Oh... You are in *so* much trouble."

X I V

PERCY

PERCY HAD SEEN **F**RANK SURROUNDED by cannibal ogres, facing down an unkillable giant, and even unleashing Thanatos, the god of death. But he'd never seen Frank look as terrified as he did now, finding the two of them passed out in the stables.

"What... ?" Percy rubbed his eyes. "Oh, we just fell asleep."

Frank swallowed. He was dressed in running shoes, dark cargo pants, and a Vancouver Winter Olympics T-shirt with his Roman centurion badge pinned to the neck (which seemed either sad or hopeful to Percy, now

that they were renegades). Frank averted his eyes as if the sight of them together might burn him.

"Everyone thinks you've been kidnapped," he said. "We've been scouring the ship. When Coach Hedge finds out—oh, gods, you've been here *all night*?"

"Frank!" Annabeth's ears were as red as strawberries. "We just came down here to talk. We fell asleep. Accidentally. That's *it*."

"Kissed a couple of times," Percy said.

Annabeth glared at him. "Not helping!"

"We'd better..." Frank pointed to the stable doors. "Uh, we're supposed to meet for breakfast. Would you explain what you did—I mean didn't do? I mean... I really don't want that faun—I mean satyr—to kill me."

Frank ran.

When everyone finally gathered in the mess hall, it wasn't quite as bad as Frank had feared. Jason and Piper were mostly relieved. Leo couldn't stop grinning and muttering, "Classic. Classic." Only Hazel seemed scandalized, maybe because she was from the 1940s. She kept fanning her face and wouldn't meet Percy's eyes.

Naturally, Coach Hedge went ballistic; but Percy found it hard to take the satyr seriously since he was barely five feet tall.

"Never in my life!" Coach bellowed, waving his bat and knocking over a plate of apples. "Against the rules!"

Irresponsible!”

“Coach,” Annabeth said, “it was an accident. We were talking, and we fell asleep.”

“Besides,” Percy said, “you’re starting to sound like Terminus.”

Hedge narrowed his eyes. “Is that an insult, Jackson? ’Cause I’ll—I’ll terminus you, buddy!”

Percy tried not to laugh. “It won’t happen again, Coach. I promise. Now, don’t we have other things to discuss?”

Hedge fumed. “Fine! But I’m watching you, Jackson. And you, Annabeth Chase, I thought you had more sense—”

Jason cleared his throat. “So grab some food, everybody. Let’s get started.”

The meeting was like a war council with donuts. Then again, back at Camp Half-Blood they used to have their most serious discussions around the Ping-Pong table in the rec room with crackers and Cheez Whiz, so Percy felt right at home.

He told them about his dream—the twin giants planning a reception for them in an underground parking lot with rocket launchers; Nico di Angelo trapped in a bronze jar, slowly dying from asphyxiation with pomegranate seeds at his feet.

Hazel choked back a sob. “Nico... Oh, gods. The

seeds.”

“You know what they are?” Annabeth asked.

Hazel nodded. “He showed them to me once. They’re from our stepmother’s garden.”

“Your step... oh,” Percy said. “You mean Persephone.”

Percy had met the wife of Hades once. She hadn’t been exactly warm and sunny. He had also been to her Underworld garden—a creepy place full of crystal trees and flowers that bloomed bloodred and ghost white.

“The seeds are a last-resort food,” Hazel said. Percy could tell she was nervous, because all the silverware on the table was starting to move toward her. “Only children of Hades can eat them. Nico always kept some in case he got stuck somewhere. But if he’s really imprisoned—”

“The giants are trying to lure us,” Annabeth said. “They’re assuming we’ll try to rescue him.”

“Well, they’re right!” Hazel looked around the table, her confidence apparently crumbling. “Won’t we?”

“Yes!” Coach Hedge yelled with a mouthful of napkins. “It’ll involve fighting, right?”

“Hazel, of course we’ll help him,” Frank said. “But how long do we have before... uh, I mean, how long can Nico hold out?”

“One seed a day,” Hazel said miserably. “That’s if

he puts himself in a death trance.”

“A death trance?” Annabeth scowled. “That doesn’t sound fun.”

“It keeps him from consuming all his air,” Hazel said. “Like hibernation, or a coma. One seed can sustain him one day, barely.”

“And he has five seeds left,” Percy said. “That’s five days, including today. The giants must have planned it that way, so we’d have to arrive by July first. Assuming Nico is hidden somewhere in Rome—”

“That’s not much time,” Piper summed up. She put her hand on Hazel’s shoulder. “We’ll find him. At least we know what the lines of the prophecy mean now. ‘Twins snuff out the angel’s breath, who holds the key to endless death.’ Your brother’s last name: di Angelo. *Angelo* is Italian for ‘angel.’”

“Oh, gods,” Hazel muttered. “Nico...”

Percy stared at his jelly donut. He had a rocky history with Nico di Angelo. The guy had once tricked him into visiting Hades’s palace, and Percy had ended up in a cell. But most of the time, Nico sided with the good guys. He certainly didn’t deserve slow suffocation in a bronze jar, and Percy couldn’t stand seeing Hazel in pain.

“We’ll rescue him,” he promised her. “We *have* to. The prophecy says he holds the key to endless death.”

“That’s right,” Piper said encouragingly. “Hazel,

your brother went searching for the Doors of Death in the Underworld, right? He must've found them."

"He can tell us where the doors are," Percy said, "and how to close them."

Hazel took a deep breath. "Yes. Good."

"Uh..." Leo shifted in his chair. "One thing. The giants are expecting us to do this, right? So we're walking into a trap?"

Hazel looked at Leo like he'd made a rude gesture. "We have no choice!"

"Don't get me wrong, Hazel. It's just that your brother, Nico... he knew about both camps, right?"

"Well, yes," Hazel said.

"He's been going back and forth," Leo said, "and he didn't tell either side."

Jason sat forward, his expression grim. "You're wondering if we can trust the guy. So am I."

Hazel shot to her feet. "I don't believe this. He's my *brother*. He brought me back from the Underworld, and you don't want to help him?"

Frank put his hand on her shoulder. "Nobody's saying that." He glared at Leo. "Nobody had *better* be saying that."

Leo blinked. "Look, guys. All I mean is—"

"Hazel," Jason said. "Leo is raising a fair point. I remember Nico from Camp Jupiter. Now I find out he also visited Camp Half-Blood. That does strike me as..."

well, a little shady. Do we really know where his loyalties lie? We just have to be careful.”

Hazel’s arms shook. A silver platter zoomed toward her and hit the wall to her left, splattering scrambled eggs. “You... the *great* Jason Grace... the praetor I looked up to. You were supposed to be so fair, such a good leader. And now you...” Hazel stomped her foot and stormed out of the mess hall.

“Hazel!” Leo called after her. “Ah, jeez. I should —”

“You’ve done enough,” Frank growled. He got up to follow her, but Piper gestured for him to wait.

“Give her time,” Piper advised. Then she frowned at Leo and Jason. “You guys, that *was* pretty cold.”

Jason looked shocked. “Cold? I’m just being cautious!”

“Her brother is dying,” Piper said.

“I’ll go talk to her,” Frank insisted.

“No,” Piper said. “Let her cool down first. Trust me on this. I’ll go check on her in a few minutes.”

“But...” Frank huffed like an irritated bear. “Fine. I’ll wait.”

From up above came a whirring sound like a large drill.

“That’s Festus,” Leo said. “I’ve got him on autopilot, but we must be nearing Atlanta. I’ll have to get up there... uh, assuming we know where to land.”

Everyone turned to Percy.

Jason raised an eyebrow. "You're Captain Salt Water. Any ideas from the expert?"

Was that resentment in his voice? Percy wondered if Jason was secretly miffed about the duel in Kansas. Jason had joked about it, but Percy figured that they both harbored a little grudge. You couldn't put two demigods in a fight and not have them wonder who was stronger.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "Somewhere central, high up so we can get a good view of the city. Maybe a park with some woods? We don't want to land a warship in the middle of downtown. I doubt even the Mist could cover up something that huge."

Leo nodded. "On it." He raced for the stairs.

Frank settled back in his chair uneasily. Percy felt bad for him. On the trip to Alaska, he had watched Hazel and Frank grow close. He knew how protective Frank felt toward her. He also noticed the baleful look Frank was giving Leo. He decided it might be a good idea to get Frank off the ship for a while.

"When we land, I'll scout around in Atlanta," Percy said. "Frank, I could use your help."

"You mean turn into a dragon again? Honestly, Percy, I don't want to spend the whole quest being everyone's flying taxi."

"No," Percy said. "I want you with me because

you've got the blood of Poseidon. Maybe you can help me figure out where to find salt water. Besides, you're good in a fight."

That seemed to make Frank feel a little better. "Sure. I guess."

"Great," Percy said. "We should take one more. Annabeth—"

"Oh, no!" Coach Hedge barked. "Young lady, you are *grounded*."

Annabeth stared at him like he was speaking a foreign language. "Excuse me?"

"You and Jackson are not going *anywhere* together!" Hedge insisted. He glared at Percy, daring him to mouth off. "*I'll* go with Frank and Mr. Sneaky Jackson. The rest of you guard the ship and make sure Annabeth doesn't break any more rules!"

Wonderful, Percy thought. A boys' day out with Frank and a bloodthirsty satyr, to find salt water in a landlocked city.

"This," he said, "is going to be *so* much fun."

X V

PERCY

PERCY CLIMBED OUT ON DECK AND SAID, “WOW.”

They had landed near the summit of a forested hill. A complex of white buildings, like a museum or a university, nestled in a grove of pines to the left. Below them spread the city of Atlanta—a cluster of brown and silver downtown skyscrapers two miles away, rising from what looked like an endless flat sprawl of highways, railroad tracks, houses, and green swathes of forest.

“Ah, lovely spot.” Coach Hedge inhaled the

morning air. “Good choice, Valdez.”

Leo shrugged. “I just picked a tall hill. That’s a presidential library or something over there. At least that’s what Festus says.”

“I don’t know about that!” Hedge barked. “But do you realize what happened on this hill? Frank Zhang, you should know!”

Frank flinched. “I should?”

“A son of Ares stood here!” Hedge cried indignantly.

“I’m Roman... so Mars, actually.”

“Whatever! Famous spot in the American Civil War!”

“I’m Canadian, actually.”

“Whatever! General Sherman, Union leader. He stood on this hill watching the city of Atlanta burn. Cut a path of destruction all the way from here to the sea. Burning, looting, pillaging—now *there* was a demigod!”

Frank inched away from the satyr. “Uh, okay.”

Percy didn’t care much about history, but he wondered whether landing here was a bad omen. He’d heard that most human civil wars started as fights between Greek and Roman demigods. Now they were standing on the site of one such battle. The entire city below them had been leveled on orders of a child of Ares.

Percy could imagine some of the kids at Camp Half-Blood giving such a command. Clarisse La Rue, for instance, wouldn't hesitate. But he couldn't imagine Frank being so harsh.

"Anyway," Percy said, "let's try not to burn down the city this time."

The coach looked disappointed. "All right. But where to?"

Percy pointed toward downtown. "When in doubt, start in the middle."

Catching a ride there was easier than they thought. The three of them headed to the presidential library—which turned out to be the Carter Center—and asked the staff if they could call a taxi or give them directions to the nearest bus stop. Percy could have summoned Blackjack, but he was reluctant to ask the pegasus for help so soon after their last disaster. Frank didn't want to polymorph into anything. And besides, Percy was kind of hoping to travel like a regular mortal for a change.

One of the librarians, whose name was Esther, insisted on driving them personally. She was so nice about it, Percy thought she must be a monster in disguise; but Hedge pulled him aside and assured him that Esther smelled like a normal human.

"With a hint of potpourri," he said. "Cloves. Rose

petals. Tasty!”

They piled into Esther’s big black Cadillac and drove toward downtown. Esther was so tiny, she could barely see over the steering wheel; but that didn’t seem to bother her. She muscled her car through traffic while regaling them with stories about the crazy families of Atlanta—the old plantation owners, the founders of Coca-Cola, the sports stars, and the CNN news people. She sounded so knowledgeable that Percy decided to try his luck.

“Uh, so, Esther,” he said, “here’s a hard question for you. Salt water in Atlanta. What’s the first thing that comes to mind?”

The old lady chuckled. “Oh, sugar. That’s easy. Whale sharks!”

Frank and Percy exchanged looks.

“Whale sharks?” Frank asked nervously. “You have those in Atlanta?”

“At the aquarium, sugar,” Esther said. “Very famous! Right downtown. Is that where you wanted to go?”

An aquarium. Percy considered that. He didn’t know what an Ancient Greek sea god would be doing at a Georgia aquarium, but he didn’t have any better ideas.

“Yes,” Percy said. “That’s where we’re going.”

Esther dropped them at the main entrance, where a

line was already forming. She insisted on giving them her cell phone number for emergencies, money for a taxi ride back to the Carter Center, and a jar of homemade peach preserves, which for some reason she kept in a box in her trunk. Frank stuck the jar in his backpack and thanked Esther, who had already switched from calling him *sugar* to *son*.

As she drove away, Frank said, "Are all people in Atlanta that nice?"

Hedge grunted. "Hope not. I can't fight them if they're nice. Let's go beat up some whale sharks. They sound dangerous!"

It hadn't occurred to Percy that they might have to pay admission, or stand in line behind a bunch of families and kids from summer camps.

Looking at the elementary schoolers in their colorful T-shirts from various day camps, Percy felt a twinge of sadness. He should be at Camp Half-Blood right now, settling into his cabin for the summer, teaching sword-fighting lessons in the arena, planning pranks on the other counselors. These kids had no idea just how crazy a summer camp could be.

He sighed. "Well, I guess we wait in line. Anybody have money?"

Frank checked his pockets. "Three denarii from Camp Jupiter. Five dollars Canadian."

Hedge patted his gym shorts and pulled out what he

found. “Three quarters, two dimes, a rubber band and—score! A piece of celery.”

He started munching on the celery, eyeing the change and the rubber band like they might be next.

“Great,” Percy said. His own pockets were empty except for his pen/sword, Riptide. He was pondering whether or not they could sneak in somehow, when a woman in a blue-and-green Georgia Aquarium shirt came up to them, smiling brightly.

“Ah, VIP visitors!” She had perky dimpled cheeks, thick-framed glasses, braces, and frizzy black hair pulled to the sides in pigtails, so that even though she was probably in her late twenties, she looked like a schoolgirl nerd—sort of cute, but sort of odd. Along with her Georgia Aquarium polo shirt, she wore dark slacks and black sneakers, and she bounced on the balls of her feet like she simply couldn’t contain her energy. Her name tag read KATE.

“You have your payment, I see,” she said. “Excellent!”

“What?” Percy asked.

Kate scooped the three denarii out of Frank’s hand.

“Yes, that’s fine. Right this way!”

She spun and trotted off toward the main entrance.

Percy looked at Coach Hedge and Frank. “A trap?”

“Probably,” Frank said.

“She’s not mortal,” Hedge said, sniffing the air.

“Probably some sort of goat-eating, demigod-destroying fiend from Tartarus.”

“No doubt,” Percy agreed.

“Awesome.” Hedge grinned. “Let’s go.”

Kate got them past the ticket queue and into the aquarium with no problem.

“Right this way.” Kate grinned at Percy. “It’s a *wonderful* exhibit. You won’t be disappointed. So rare we get VIPs.”

“Uh, you mean demigods?” Frank asked.

Kate winked at him impishly and put a finger to her mouth. “So over here is the cold-water experience, with your penguins and beluga whales and whatnot. And over there... well, those are some fish, obviously.”

For an aquarium worker, she didn’t seem to know much or care much about the smaller fish. They passed one huge tank full of tropical species, and when Frank pointed to a particular fish and asked what it was, Kate said, “Oh, those are the yellow ones.”

They passed the gift shop. Frank slowed down to check out a clearance table with clothes and toys.

“Take what you want,” Kate told him.

Frank blinked. “Really?”

“Of course! You’re a VIP!”

Frank hesitated. Then he stuffed some T-shirts in his backpack.

“Dude,” Percy said, “what are you doing?”

“She said I could,” Frank whispered. “Besides, I need more clothes. I didn’t pack for a long trip!”

He added a snow globe to his stash, which didn’t seem like clothing to Percy. Then Frank picked up a braided cylinder about the size of a candy bar.

He squinted at it. “What is—?”

“Chinese handcuffs,” Percy said.

Frank, who was Chinese Canadian, looked offended. “How is this Chinese?”

“I don’t know,” Percy said. “That’s just what it’s called. It’s like a gag gift.”

“Come along, boys!” Kate called from across the hall.

“I’ll show you later,” Percy promised.

Frank stuffed the handcuffs in his backpack, and they kept walking.

They passed through an acrylic tunnel. Fish swam over their heads, and Percy felt irrational panic building in his throat.

This is dumb, he told himself. I’ve been underwater a million times. And I’m not even in the water.

The real threat was Kate, he reminded himself. Hedge had already detected that she wasn’t human. Any minute she might turn into some horrible creature and attack them. Unfortunately, Percy didn’t see much choice but to play along with her VIP tour until they could find the sea god Phorcys, even if they were

walking deeper into a trap.

They emerged in a viewing room awash with blue light. On the other side of a glass wall was the biggest aquarium tank Percy had ever seen. Cruising in circles were dozens of huge fish, including two spotted sharks, each twice Percy's size. They were fat and slow, with open mouths and no teeth.

"Whale sharks," Coach Hedge growled. "Now we shall battle to the death!"

Kate giggled. "Silly satyr. Whale sharks are peaceful. They only eat plankton."

Percy scowled. He wondered how Kate knew the coach was a satyr. Hedge was wearing pants and specially fitted shoes over his hooves, like satyrs usually did to blend in with mortals. His baseball cap covered his horns. The more Kate giggled and acted friendly, the more Percy didn't like her; but Coach Hedge didn't seem fazed.

"Peaceful sharks?" the coach said with disgust. "What's the point of that?"

Frank read the plaque next to the tank. "The only whale sharks in captivity in the world," he mused. "That's kind of amazing."

"Yes, and these are small," Kate said. "You should see some of my other babies out in the wild."

"Your babies?" Frank asked.

Judging from the wicked glint in Kate's eyes, Percy

was pretty sure he didn't want to meet Kate's *babies*. He decided it was time to get to the point. He didn't want to go any farther into this aquarium than he had to.

"So, Kate," he said, "we're looking for a guy...I mean a god, named Phorcys. Would you happen to know him?"

Kate snorted. "*Know* him? He's my brother. That's where we're going, sillies. The *real* exhibits are right through here."

She gestured at the far wall. The solid black surface rippled, and another tunnel appeared, leading through a luminous purple tank.

Kate strolled inside. The last thing Percy wanted to do was follow, but if Phorcys was really on the other side, and if he had information that would help their quest...Percy took a deep breath and followed his friends into the tunnel.

As soon as they entered, Coach Hedge whistled. "Now *that's* interesting."

Gliding above them were multicolored jellyfish the size of trash cans, each with hundreds of tentacles that looked like silky barbed wire. One jellyfish had a paralyzed ten-foot-long swordfish tangled in its grasp. The jellyfish slowly wrapped its tendrils tighter and tighter around its prey.

Kate beamed at Coach Hedge. "You see? Forget the

whale sharks! And there's much more."

Kate led them into an even larger chamber, lined with more aquariums. On one wall, a glowing red sign proclaimed: DEATH IN THE DEEP SEAS! *Sponsored by Monster Donut.*

Percy had to read the sign twice because of his dyslexia, and then twice more to let the message sink in. "Monster Donut?"

"Oh, yes," Kate said. "One of our corporate sponsors."

Percy gulped. His last experience with Monster Donut hadn't been pleasant. It had involved acid-spitting serpent heads, much screaming, and a cannon.

In one aquarium, a dozen hippocampi—horses with the tails of fish—drifted aimlessly. Percy had seen many hippocampi in the wild. He'd even ridden a few; but he had never seen any in an aquarium. He tried to speak with them, but they just floated around, occasionally bonking against the glass. Their minds seemed addled.

"This isn't right," Percy muttered.

He turned and saw something even worse. At the bottom of a smaller tank, two Nereids—female sea spirits—sat cross-legged, facing each other, playing a game of Go Fish. They looked incredibly bored. Their long green hair floated listlessly around their faces. Their eyes were half closed.

Percy felt so angry, he could hardly breathe. He glared at Kate. “How can you keep them here?”

“I know.” Kate sighed. “They aren’t very interesting. We tried to teach them some tricks, but with no luck, I’m afraid. I think you’ll like this tank over here much better.”

Percy started to protest, but Kate had already moved on.

“Holy mother of goats!” cried Coach Hedge. “Look at these beauties!”

He was gawking at two sea serpents—thirty-foot-long monsters with glowing blue scales and jaws that could have bitten a whale shark in half. In another tank, peeking out from its cement cave, was a squid the size of an eighteen-wheeler, with a beak like a giant bolt cutter.

A third tank held a dozen humanoid creatures with sleek seal bodies, doglike faces, and human hands. They sat on the sand at the bottom of the tank, building things out of Legos, though the creatures seemed just as dazed as the Nereids.

“Are those—?” Percy struggled to form the question.

“Telkhines?” Kate said. “Yes! The only ones in captivity.”

“But they fought for Kronos in the last war!” Percy said. “They’re dangerous!”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Well, we couldn’t call it ‘Death in the Deep Seas’ if these exhibits weren’t dangerous. Don’t worry. We keep them well sedated.”

“Sedated?” Frank asked. “Is that legal?”

Kate appeared not to have heard. She kept walking, pointing out other exhibits. Percy looked back at the talkhines. One was obviously a youngster. He was trying to make a sword out of Legos, but he seemed too groggy to put the pieces together. Percy had never liked sea demons, but now he felt sorry for them.

“And *these* sea monsters,” Kate narrated up ahead, “can grow five hundred feet long in the deep ocean. They have over a thousand teeth. And these? Their favorite food is demigod—”

“Demigod?” Frank yelped.

“But they will eat whales or small boats, too.” Kate turned to Percy and blushed. “Sorry...I’m *such* a monster nerd! I’m sure you know all this, being the son of Poseidon, and all.”

Percy’s ears were ringing like alarm bells. He didn’t like how much Kate knew about him. He didn’t like the way she casually tossed out information about drugging captive creatures or which of her *babies* liked to devour demigods.

“Who *are* you?” he demanded. “Does Kate stand for something?”

“Kate?” She looked momentarily confused. Then

she glanced at her name tag. “Oh...” She laughed. “No, it’s—”

“Hello!” said a new voice, booming through the aquarium.

A small man scuttled out of the darkness. He walked sideways on bowed legs like a crab, his back hunched, his arms raised on either side like he was holding invisible plates.

He wore a wet suit that was several horrible shades of green. Glittery silver words printed down the side read: PORKY’S FOLLIES. A headset microphone was clamped over his greasy wiry hair. His eyes were milky blue, one higher than the other, and though he smiled, he didn’t look friendly—more like his face was being peeled back in a wind tunnel.

“Visitors!” the man said, the word thundering through the microphone. He had a DJ’s voice, deep and resonant, which did not at all match his appearance. “Welcome to Phorcys’s Follies!”

He swept his arms in one direction, as if directing their attention to an explosion. Nothing happened.

“Curse it,” the man grumbled. “Telkhines, that’s your cue! I wave my hands, and you leap energetically in your tank, do a synchronized double spin, and land in pyramid formation. We practiced this!”

The sea demons paid him no attention.

Coach Hedge leaned toward the crab man and

sniffed his glittery wet suit. “*Nice* outfit.”

He didn’t sound like he was kidding. Of course, the satyr wore gym uniforms for fun.

“Thank you!” The man beamed. “I am Phorcys.”

Frank shifted his weight from foot to foot. “Why does your suit say *Porky*?”

Phorcys snarled. “Stupid uniform company! They can’t get anything right.”

Kate tapped her name tag. “I told them my name was *Keto*. They misspelled it as *Kate*. My brother... well, now he’s *Porky*.”

“I am not!” the man snapped. “I’m not even a *little* porky. The name doesn’t work with Follies, either. What kind of show is called *Porky’s Follies*? But you folks don’t want to hear us complain. Behold, the wondrous majesty of the giant killer squid!”

He gestured dramatically toward the squid tank. This time, fireworks shot off in front of the glass right on cue, sending up geysers of golden sparkles. Music swelled from the loudspeakers. The lights brightened and revealed the wondrous majesty of an empty tank.

The squid had apparently skulked back into its cave.

“Curse it!” Phorcys yelled again. He wheeled on his sister. “*Keto*, training the squid was *your* job. Juggling, I said. Maybe a bit of flesh-rending for the finale. Is that too much to ask?”

“He’s shy,” Keto said defensively. “Besides, each of his tentacles has sixty-two razorlike barbs that have to be sharpened daily.” She turned toward Frank. “Did you know the monstrous squid is the only beast known to eat demigods whole, armor and all, without getting indigestion? It’s true!”

Frank stumbled away from her, hugging his gut as if making sure he was still in one piece.

“Keto!” Porky snapped—literally, since he clicked his fingers to his thumbs like crab claws. “You’ll bore our guests with so much information. Less education, more entertainment! We’ve discussed this.”

“But—”

“No buts! We’re here to present ‘Death in the Deep Seas!’ Sponsored by Monster Donut!”

The last words reverberated through the room with extra echo. Lights flashed. Smoke clouds billowed from the floor, making donut-shaped rings that smelled like real donuts.

“Available at the concession stand,” Phorcys advised. “But you’ve spent your hard-earned denarii to get the VIP tour, and so you shall! Come with me!”

“Um, hold it,” Percy said.

Phorcys’s smile melted in an ugly way. “Yes?”

“You’re a sea god, aren’t you?” Percy asked. “Son of Gaea?”

The crab man sighed. “Five thousand years, and

I'm still known as Gaea's little boy. Never mind that I'm one of the oldest sea gods in existence. Older than *your* upstart father, by the way. I'm god of the hidden depths! Lord of watery terrors! Father of a thousand monsters! But, no...nobody even knows me. I make one little mistake, supporting the Titans in their war, and I'm exiled from the ocean—to Atlanta, of all places.”

“We thought the Olympians said *Atlantis*,” Keto explained. “Their idea of a joke, I guess, sending us here instead.”

Percy narrowed his eyes. “And you’re a goddess?”

“Keto, yes!” She smiled happily. “Goddess of sea monsters, naturally! Whales, sharks, squids, and other giant sea life, but my heart always belonged to the monsters. Did you know that young sea serpents can regurgitate the flesh of their victims and keep themselves fed for up to six years on the same meal? It’s true!”

Frank was still clutching his stomach like he was going to be sick.

Coach Hedge whistled. “Six years? That’s fascinating.”

“I know!” Keto beamed.

“And how exactly does a killer squid rend the flesh from its victims?” Hedge asked. “I *love* nature.”

“Oh, well—”

“Stop!” Phorcys demanded. “You’re ruining the show! Now, witness our Nereid gladiators fight to the death!”

A mirrored disco ball descended into the Nereid exhibit, making the water dance with multicolored light. Two swords fell to the bottom and plunked in the sand. The Nereids ignored them and kept playing Go Fish.

“Curse it!” Phorcys stomped his legs sideways.

Keto grimaced at Coach Hedge. “Don’t mind Porky. He’s *such* a windbag. Come with me, my fine satyr. I’ll show you full-color diagrams of the monsters’ hunting habits.”

“Excellent!”

Before Percy could object, Keto led Coach Hedge away through a maze of aquarium glass, leaving Frank and him alone with the crabby sea god.

A bead of sweat traced its way down Percy’s neck. He exchanged a nervous look with Frank. This felt like a *divide-and-conquer* strategy. He didn’t see any way the encounter was going to end well. Part of him wanted to attack Phorcys now—at least that might give them the element of surprise—but they hadn’t found out any useful information yet. Percy wasn’t sure he could find Coach Hedge again. He wasn’t even sure he could find the exit.

Phorcys must’ve read his expression.

“Oh, it’s fine!” the god assured him. “Keto might be a little boring, but she’ll take good care of your friend. And honestly, the best part of the tour is still to come!”

Percy tried to think, but he was starting to get a headache. He wasn’t sure if it was from yesterday’s head injury, Phorcys’s special effects, or his sister’s lectures on nauseating sea monster facts. “So...” he managed. “Dionysus sent us here.”

“Bacchus,” Frank corrected.

“Right.” Percy tried to keep his annoyance in check. He could barely remember one name for each god. Two was pushing it. “The wine god. Whatever.” He looked at Phorcys. “Bacchus said you might know what your mom Gaea is up to, and these twin giant brothers of yours—Ephialtes and Otis. And if you happen to know anything about this Mark of Athena—”

“Bacchus thought I would help you?” Phorcys asked.

“Well, yeah,” Percy said. “I mean, you’re Phorcys. Everybody talks about you.”

Phorcys tilted his head so that his mismatched eyes almost lined up. “They do?”

“Of course. Don’t they, Frank?”

“Oh... sure!” Frank said. “People talk about you all the time.”

“What do they say?” the god asked.

Frank looked uncomfortable. “Well, you have great pyrotechnics. And a good announcer’s voice. And, um, a disco ball—”

“It’s true!” Phorcys clacked his fingers and thumbs excitedly. “I also have the largest collection of captive sea monsters in the world!”

“And you *know* stuff,” Percy added. “Like about the twins and what they’re up to.”

“The twins!” Phorcys made his voice echo. Sparklers blazed to life in front of the sea serpent tank. “Yes, I know all about Ephialtes and Otis. Those wannabes! They never fit in with the other giants. Too puny—and those snakes for feet.”

“Snakes for feet?” Percy remembered the long, curly shoes the twins had been wearing in his dream.

“Yes, yes,” Phorcys said impatiently. “They knew they couldn’t get by on their strength, so they decided to go for drama—illusions, stage tricks, that sort of thing. You see, Gaea *shaped* her giant children with specific enemies in mind. Each giant was born to kill a certain god. Ephialtes and Otis...well, together they were sort of the anti-Dionysus.”

Percy tried to wrap his mind around that idea. “So...they want to replace all wine with cranberry juice or something?”

The sea god snorted. “Nothing like that! Ephialtes and Otis always wanted to do things better, flashier,

more spectacular! Oh, of course they wanted to kill Dionysus. But first they wanted to humiliate him by making his revelries look tame!”

Frank glanced at the sparklers. “By using stuff like fireworks and disco balls?”

Phorcys’s mouth stretched into that wind tunnel smile. “Exactly! I taught the twins everything they know, or at least I tried to. They never listened. Their first big trick? They tried to reach Olympus by piling mountains on top of one another. It was just an illusion, of course. I told them it was ridiculous. ‘You should start small,’ I said. ‘Sawing each other in half, pulling gorgons out of a hat. That sort of thing. And matching sequined outfits. Twins need those!’”

“Good advice,” Percy agreed. “And now the twins are—”

“Oh, preparing for their doomsday show in Rome,” Phorcys sneered. “It’s one of Mother’s silly ideas. They’re keeping some prisoner in a large bronze jar.” He turned toward Frank. “You’re a child of Ares, aren’t you? You’ve got that smell. The twins imprisoned your father the same way, once.”

“Child of Mars,” Frank corrected. “Wait...these giants trapped my dad in a bronze jar?”

“Yes, another stupid stunt,” said the sea god. “How can you show off your prisoner if he’s in a bronze jar? No entertainment value. Not like my lovely

specimens!”

He gestured to the hippocampi, who were bonking their heads apathetically against the glass.

Percy tried to think. He felt like the lethargy of the addled sea creatures was starting to affect him. “You said this—this doomsday show was Gaea’s idea?”

“Well... Mother’s plans always have lots of layers.” He laughed. “The earth has layers! I suppose that makes sense!”

“Uh-huh,” Percy said. “And so her plan...”

“Oh, she’s put out a general bounty on some group of demigods,” Phorcys said. “She doesn’t really care *who* kills them, as long as they’re killed. Well... I take that back. She was very specific that *two* must be spared. One boy and one girl. Tartarus only knows why. At any rate, the twins have their little show planned, hoping it will lure these demigods to Rome. I suppose the prisoner in the jar is a friend of theirs or some such. That, or perhaps they think this group of demigods will be foolish enough to come into their territory searching for the Mark of Athena.” Phorcys elbowed Frank in the ribs. “Ha! Good luck with that, eh?”

Frank laughed nervously. “Yeah. Ha-ha. That would be really dumb because, uh...”

Phorcys narrowed his eyes.

Percy slipped his hand into his pocket. He closed

his fingers around Riptide. Even this old sea god must be smart enough to realize they were the demigods with the bounty on their heads.

But Phorcys just grinned and elbowed Frank again. “Ha! Good one, child of Mars. I suppose you’re right. No point talking about it. Even if the demigods found that map in Charleston, they’d never make it to Rome alive!”

“Yes, the MAP IN CHARLESTON,” Frank said loudly, giving Percy a wide-eyed look to make sure he hadn’t missed the information. He couldn’t have been more obvious if he had held up a large sign that read *CLUE!!!!*

“But enough boring educational stuff!” Phorcys said. “You’ve paid for the VIP treatment. Won’t you *please* let me finish the tour? The three denarii entrance fee is nonrefundable, you know.”

Percy wasn’t excited about more fireworks, donut-scented smoke, or depressing captive sea creatures. But he glanced at Frank and decided they’d better humor the crabby old god, at least until they found Coach Hedge and got safely to the exit. Besides, they might be able to get more information out of Phorcys.

“Afterward,” Percy said, “can we ask questions?”

“Of course! I’ll tell you everything you need to know.” Phorcys clapped his hands twice. On the wall under the glowing red sign, a new tunnel appeared,

leading into another tank.

“Walk this way!” Phorcys scuttled sideways through the tunnel.

Frank scratched his head. “Do we have to—?” He turned sideways.

“It’s just a figure of speech, man,” Percy said. “Come on.”

XVI

PERCY

THE TUNNEL RAN ALONG THE FLOOR of a gymnasium-sized tank. Except for water and some cheap decorations, it seemed majestically empty. Percy guessed there were about fifty thousand gallons of water over their heads. If the tunnel were to shatter for some reason...

No big deal, Percy thought. I've been surrounded by water thousands of times. This is my home court.

But his heart was pounding. He remembered sinking into the cold Alaskan bog—black mud covering

his eyes, mouth, and nose.

Phorcys stopped in the middle of the tunnel and spread his arms proudly. “Beautiful exhibit, isn’t it?”

Percy tried to distract himself by concentrating on details. In one corner of the tank, snuggled in a forest of fake kelp, was a life-sized plastic gingerbread cottage with bubbles coming out of the chimney. In the opposite corner, a plastic sculpture of a guy in an old-fashioned diving suit knelt beside a treasure chest, which popped open every few seconds, spewed bubbles, and closed again. Littered across the white sand floor were glass marbles the size of bowling balls, and a strange assortment of weapons like tridents and spearguns. Outside the tank’s display wall was an amphitheater with seating for several hundred.

“What do you keep in here?” Frank asked. “Giant killer goldfish?”

Phorcys raised his eyebrows. “Oh, that would be good! But, no, Frank Zhang, descendant of Poseidon. This tank is not for goldfish.”

At *descendant of Poseidon*, Frank flinched. He stepped back, gripping his backpack like a mace he was prepared to swing.

A sense of dread trickled down Percy’s throat like cough syrup. Unfortunately, it was a feeling he was used to.

“How do you know Frank’s last name?” he

demanded. “How do you know he’s descended from Poseidon?”

“Well...” Phorcys shrugged, trying to look modest. “It was probably in the descriptions Gaea provided. You know, for the bounty, Percy Jackson.”

Percy uncapped his pen. Instantly, Riptide appeared in his hand. “Don’t double-cross me, Phorcys. You promised me answers.”

“After the VIP treatment, yes,” Phorcys agreed. “I promised to tell you everything you need to know. The thing is, however, you don’t really need to know anything.” His grotesque smile stretched wide. “You see, even if you made it to Rome, which is *quite* unlikely, you’d never defeat my giant brothers without a god fighting at your side. And what god would help you? So I have a better plan. You’re not leaving. You’re VIPs—Very Important Prisoners!”

Percy lunged. Frank hurled his backpack at the sea god’s head. Phorcys simply disappeared.

The god’s voice reverberated through the aquarium’s sound system, echoing down the tunnel. “Yes, good! Fighting is good! You see, Mother never trusted me with big assignments, but she *did* agree that I could keep anything I caught. You two will make an excellent exhibit—the only demigod spawn of Poseidon in captivity. ‘Demigod Terrors’—yes, I like that! We already have sponsorship lined up with

Bargain Mart. You can fight each other every day at eleven AM and one PM, with an evening show at seven PM.”

“You’re crazy!” Frank yelled.

“Don’t sell yourself short!” Phorcys said. “You’ll be our biggest draw!”

Frank ran for the exit, only to slam into a glass wall. Percy ran the other way and found it blocked as well. Their tunnel had become a bubble. He put his hand against the glass and realized it was softening, melting like ice. Soon the water would come crashing in.

“We won’t cooperate, Phorcys!” he shouted.

“Oh, I’m optimistic,” the sea god’s voice boomed. “If you won’t fight each other at first, no problem! I can send in fresh sea monsters every day. After you get used to the food here, you’ll be properly sedated and will follow directions. Believe me, you’ll come to love your new home.”

Over Percy’s head, the glass dome cracked and began to leak.

“I’m the son of Poseidon!” Percy tried to keep the fear out of his voice. “You can’t imprison me in water. This is where I’m strongest.”

Phorcys’s laugh seemed to come from all around them. “What a coincidence! It’s also where *I’m* strongest. This tank is specially designed to contain

demigods. Now, have fun, you two. I'll see you at feeding time!"

The glass dome shattered, and the water crashed in.

Percy held his breath until he couldn't stand it. When he finally filled his lungs with water, it felt just like normal breathing. The water pressure didn't bother him. His clothes didn't even get wet. His underwater abilities were as good as ever.

It's just a stupid phobia, he assured himself. I'm not going to drown.

Then he remembered Frank, and he immediately felt a surge of panic and guilt. Percy had been so worried about himself that he'd forgotten his friend was only a distant descendant of Poseidon. *Frank* couldn't breathe underwater.

But where *was* he?

Percy turned in a full circle. Nothing. Then he glanced up. Hovering about him was a giant goldfish. Frank had turned—clothes, backpack, and all—into a koi the size of a teenaged boy.

Dude. Percy sent his thoughts through the water, the way he spoke with other sea creatures. *A goldfish?*

Frank's voice came back to him: *I freaked. We were talking about goldfish, so it was on my mind. Sue me.*

I'm having a telepathic conversation with a giant

koi, Percy said. *Great. Can you turn into something more...useful?*

Silence. Maybe Frank was concentrating, though it was impossible to tell, since koi don't have many expressions.

Sorry. Frank sounded embarrassed. *I'm stuck. That happens sometimes when I panic.*

Fine. Percy gritted his teeth. *Let's figure out how to escape.*

Frank swam around the tank and reported no exits. The top was covered with Celestial bronze mesh, like the curtains that roll down over closed storefronts at the mall. Percy tried to cut through with Riptide, but he couldn't make a dent. He tried to smash through the glass wall with his sword hilt—again, no luck. Then he repeated his efforts with several of the weapons lying around the bottom of the tank and managed to break three tridents, a sword, and a speargun.

Finally he tried to control the water. He wanted it to expand and break the tank, or explode out the top. The water didn't obey. Maybe it was enchanted, or under the power of Phorcys. Percy concentrated until his ears popped, but the best he could do was blow the lid off the plastic treasure chest.

Well, that's it, he thought dejectedly. I'll have to live in a plastic gingerbread house the rest of my life, fighting my giant goldfish friend and waiting for

feeding time.

Phorcys had promised they'd learn to love it. Percy thought about the dazed telkhines, the Nereids and hippocampi, all swimming in bored, lazy circles. The thought of ending up like that didn't help to lower his anxiety level.

He wondered if Phorcys was right. Even if they managed to escape, how could they defeat the giants if the gods were all incapacitated? Bacchus might be able to help. He had killed the twin giants once before, but he would only join the fight if he got an impossible tribute, and the idea of giving Bacchus *any* kind of tribute made Percy want to gag himself with a Monster Donut.

Look! Frank said.

Outside the glass, Keto was leading Coach Hedge through the amphitheater, lecturing him on something while the coach nodded and admired the stadium seating.

Coach! Percy yelled. Then he realized it was hopeless. The coach couldn't hear telepathic yelling.

Frank bumped his head against the glass.

Hedge didn't seem to notice. Keto walked him briskly across the amphitheater. She didn't even look through the glass, probably because she assumed the tank was still empty. She pointed to the far end of the room as if saying, *Come on. More gruesome sea*

monsters this way.

Percy realized he had only a few seconds before the coach would be gone. He swam after them, but the water didn't help him move as it usually did. In fact, it seemed to be pushing him back. He dropped Riptide and used both arms.

Coach Hedge and Keto were five feet from the exit.

In desperation, Percy scooped up a giant marble and hurled it underhanded like a bowling ball.

It hit the glass with a *thunk*—not nearly loud enough to attract attention.

Percy's heart sank.

But Coach Hedge had the ears of a satyr. He glanced over his shoulder. When he saw Percy, his expression went through several changes in a matter of microseconds—incomprehension, surprise, outrage, then a mask of calm.

Before Keto could notice, Hedge pointed toward the top of the amphitheater. It looked like he might be screaming, *Gods of Olympus, what is that?*

Keto turned. Coach Hedge promptly took off his fake foot and ninja-kicked her in the back of the head with his goat hoof. Keto crumpled to the floor.

Percy winced. His own recently whopped head throbbed in sympathy, but he had never been happier to have a chaperone who liked mixed martial arts cage matches.

Hedge ran to the glass. He held up his palms like:
What are you doing in there, Jackson?

Percy pounded his fist on the glass and mouthed:
Break it!

Hedge yelled a question that might have been:
Where's Frank?

Percy pointed at the giant koi.

Frank waved his left dorsal fin. *'Sup?*

Behind Hedge, the sea goddess began to move.
Percy pointed frantically.

Hedge shook his leg like he was warming up his kicking hoof, but Percy waved his arms, *No*. They couldn't keep whopping Keto on the head forever. Since she was immortal, she wouldn't stay down, and it wouldn't get them out of this tank. It was only a matter of time before Phorcys came back to check on them.

On three, Percy mouthed, holding up three fingers and then gesturing at the glass. *All of us hit it at the same time.*

Percy had never been good at charades, but Hedge nodded like he understood. Hitting things was a language the satyr knew well.

Percy hefted another giant marble. *Frank, we'll need you too. Can you change form yet?*

Maybe back to human.

Human is fine! Just hold your breath. If this works...

Keto rose to her knees. No time to waste.

Percy counted on his fingers. *One, two, three!*

Frank turned to human and shoved his shoulder against the glass. The coach did a Chuck Norris roundhouse kick with his hoof. Percy used all his strength to slam the marble into the wall, but he did more than that. He called on the water to obey him, and this time he refused to take no for an answer. He felt all the pent-up pressure inside the tank, and he put it to use. Water liked to be free. Given time, water could overcome any barrier, and it *hated* to be trapped, just like Percy. He thought about getting back to Annabeth. He thought about destroying this horrible prison for sea creatures. He thought about shoving Phorcys's microphone down his ugly throat. Fifty thousand gallons of water responded to his anger.

The glass wall cracked. Fracture lines zigzagged from the point of impact, and suddenly the tank burst. Percy was sucked out in a torrent of water. He tumbled across the amphitheater floor with Frank, some large marbles, and a clump of plastic seaweed. Keto was just getting to her feet when the diver statue slammed into her like it wanted a hug.

Coach Hedge spit salt water. "Pan's pipes, Jackson! What were you *doing* in there?"

"Phorcys!" Percy spluttered. "Trap! Run!"

Alarms blared as they fled the exhibits. They ran

past the Nereids' tank, then the telkhines. Percy wanted to free them, but how? They were drugged and sluggish, and they were sea creatures. They wouldn't survive unless he found a way to transport them to the ocean.

Besides, if Phorcys caught them, Percy was pretty sure the sea god's power would overcome his. And Keto would be after them too, ready to feed them to her sea monsters.

I'll be back, Percy promised, but if the creatures in the exhibits could hear him, they gave no sign.

Over the sound system, Phorcys's voice boomed: "Percy Jackson!"

Flash pots and sparklers exploded randomly. Donut-scented smoke filled the halls. Dramatic music—five or six different tracks—blared simultaneously from the speakers. Lights popped and caught fire as all the special effects in the building were triggered at once.

Percy, Coach Hedge, and Frank stumbled out of the glass tunnel and found themselves back in the whale shark room. The mortal section of the aquarium was filled with screaming crowds—families and day camp groups running in every direction while the staff raced around frantically, trying to assure everyone it was just a faulty alarm system.

Percy knew better. He and his friends joined the

mortals and ran for the exit.

ANNABETH

ANNABETH WAS TRYING TO CHEER UP HAZEL, regaling her with Percy's greatest Seaweed Brain moments, when Frank stumbled down the hall and burst into her cabin.

"Where's Leo?" he gasped. "Take off! Take off!"

Both girls shot to their feet.

"Where's *Percy*?" Annabeth demanded. "And the goat?"

Frank grabbed his knees, trying to breathe. His clothes were stiff and damp, like they'd been washed in pure starch. "On deck. They're fine. We're being followed!"

Annabeth pushed past him and took the stairs three at a time, Hazel right behind her and Frank trailing, still gasping for air. Percy and Hedge lay on the deck, looking exhausted. Hedge was missing his shoes. He grinned at the sky, muttering, "Awesome. Awesome."

Percy was covered with nicks and scratches, like he'd jumped through a window. He didn't say anything, but he grasped Annabeth's hand weakly as if to say, *Be right with you, as soon as the world stops spinning.*

Leo, Piper, and Jason, who'd been eating in the mess hall, came rushing up the stairs.

"What? What?" Leo cried, holding a half-eaten grilled cheese sandwich. "Can't a guy even take a lunch break? What's wrong?"

"Followed!" Frank yelled again.

"Followed by *what*?" Jason asked.

"I don't know!" Frank panted. "Whales? Sea monsters? Maybe Kate and Porky!"

Annabeth wanted to strangle the guy, but she wasn't sure her hands would fit around his thick neck. "That makes absolutely no sense. Leo, you'd better get us out of here."

Leo put his sandwich between his teeth, pirate style, and ran for the helm.

Soon the *Argo II* was rising into the sky. Annabeth manned the aft crossbow. She saw no sign of pursuit by whales or otherwise, but Percy, Frank, and Hedge didn't start to recover until the Atlanta skyline was a hazy smudge in the distance.

"Charleston," Percy said, hobbling around the deck like an old man. He still sounded pretty shaken up. "Set course for Charleston."

“Charleston?” Jason said the name as if it brought back bad memories. “What exactly did you find in Atlanta?”

Frank unzipped his backpack and started bringing out souvenirs. “Some peach preserves. A couple of T-shirts. A snow globe. And, um, these not-really-Chinese handcuffs.”

Annabeth forced herself to stay calm. “How about you start from the top—of the story, not the backpack.”

They gathered on the quarterdeck so Leo could hear the conversation as he navigated. Percy and Frank took turns relating what had happened at the Georgia Aquarium, with Coach Hedge interjecting from time to time: “That was awesome!” or “Then I kicked her in the head!”

At least the coach seemed to have forgotten about Percy and Annabeth falling asleep in the stable the night before. But judging from Percy’s story, Annabeth had worse problems to worry about than being grounded.

When Percy explained about the captive sea creatures in the aquarium, she understood why he seemed so upset.

“That’s terrible,” she said. “We need to help them.”

“We will,” Percy promised. “In time. But I have to figure out *how*. I wish...” He shook his head. “Never mind. First we have to deal with this bounty on our

heads.”

Coach Hedge had lost interest in the conversation—probably because it was no longer about him—and wandered toward the bow of the ship, practicing his roundhouse kicks and complimenting himself on his technique.

Annabeth gripped the hilt of her dagger. “A bounty on our heads... as if we didn’t attract enough monsters already.”

“Do we get WANTED posters?” Leo asked. “And do they have our bounties, like, broken down on a price list?”

Hazel wrinkled her nose. “*What* are you talking about?”

“Just curious how much I’m going for these days,” Leo said. “I mean, I can understand not being as pricey as Percy or Jason, maybe... but am I worth, like, two Franks, or three Franks?”

“Hey!” Frank complained.

“Knock it off,” Annabeth ordered. “At least we know our next step is to go to Charleston, to find this map.”

Piper leaned against the control panel. She’d done her braid with white feathers today, which looked good with her dark brown hair. Annabeth wondered how she found the time. Annabeth could barely remember to *brush* her hair.

“A map,” Piper said. “But a map to *what*?”

“The Mark of Athena.” Percy looked cautiously at Annabeth, like he was afraid he’d overstepped. She must have been putting out a strong *I don’t want to talk about it* vibe.

“*Whatever* that is,” he continued. “We know it leads to something important in Rome, something that might heal the rift between the Romans and Greeks.”

“*The giants’ bane*,” Hazel added.

Percy nodded. “And in my dream, the twin giants said something about a statue.”

“Um...” Frank rolled his not-exactly-Chinese handcuffs between his fingers. “According to Phorcys, we’d have to be insane to try to find it. But what *is* it?”

Everyone looked at Annabeth. Her scalp tingled, as if the thoughts in her brain were agitating to get out: a statue...Athena...Greek and Roman, her nightmares, and her argument with her mom. She saw how the pieces were coming together, but she couldn’t believe it was true. The answer was too big, too important, and much too scary.

She noticed Jason studying her, as if he knew *exactly* what she was thinking and didn’t like it any more than she did. Again she couldn’t help but wonder: *Why does this guy make me so nervous? Is he really on my side?* Or maybe that was her mom talking...

“I—I’m close to an answer,” she said. “I’ll know

more if we find this map. Jason, the way you reacted to the name *Charleston*...have you been there before?"

Jason glanced uneasily at Piper, though Annabeth wasn't sure why.

"Yeah," he admitted. "Reyna and I did a quest there about a year ago. We were salvaging Imperial gold weapons from the C.S.S. *Hunley*."

"The what?" Piper asked.

"Whoa!" Leo said. "That's the first successful military submarine. From the Civil War. I always wanted to see that."

"It was designed by Roman demigods," Jason said. "It held a secret stash of Imperial gold torpedoes—until we rescued them and brought them back to Camp Jupiter."

Hazel crossed her arms. "So the Romans fought on the Confederate side? As a girl whose grandmother was a slave, can I just say...not cool?"

Jason put his hands in front of him, palms up. "I personally was not alive then. And it wasn't *all* Greeks on one side and *all* Romans on the other. But, yes. Not cool. Sometimes demigods make bad choices." He looked sheepishly at Hazel. "Like sometimes we're too suspicious. And we speak without thinking."

Hazel stared at him. Slowly it seemed to dawn on her that he was apologizing.

Jason elbowed Leo.

“Ow!” Leo yelped. “I mean, yeah...bad choices. Like not trusting people’s brothers who, you know, might need saving. Hypothetically speaking.”

Hazel pursed her lips. “Fine. Back to Charleston. Are you saying we should check that submarine again?”

Jason shrugged. “Well...I can think of *two* places in Charleston we might search. The museum where they keep the *Hunley*—that’s one of them. It has a lot of relics from the Civil War. A map could be hidden in one. I know the layout. I could lead a team inside.”

“I’ll go,” Leo said. “That sounds cool.”

Jason nodded. He turned to Frank, who was trying to pull his fingers out of the Chinese handcuffs. “You should come too, Frank. We might need you.”

Frank looked surprised. “Why? Not like I was much good at that aquarium.”

“You did fine,” Percy assured him. “It took all three of us to break that glass.”

“Besides, you’re a child of Mars,” Jason said. “The ghosts of defeated causes are bound to serve you. And the museum in Charleston has *plenty* of Confederate ghosts. We’ll need you to keep them in line.”

Frank gulped. Annabeth remembered Percy’s comment about Frank turning into a giant goldfish, and she resisted the urge to smile. She would never be able to look at the big guy again without seeing him as a koi.

“Okay.” Frank relented. “Sure.” He frowned at his fingers, trying to pull them out of the trap. “Uh, how do you—?”

Leo chuckled. “Man, you’ve never seen those before? There’s a simple trick to getting out.”

Frank tugged again with no luck. Even Hazel was trying not to laugh.

Frank grimaced with concentration. Suddenly, he disappeared. On the deck where he’d been standing, a green iguana crouched next to an empty set of Chinese handcuffs.

“Well done, Frank Zhang,” Leo said dryly, doing his impression of Chiron the centaur. “That is exactly how people beat Chinese handcuffs. They turn into iguanas.”

Everybody busted out laughing. Frank turned back to human, picked up the handcuffs, and shoved them in his backpack. He managed an embarrassed smile.

“Anyway,” Frank said, clearly anxious to change the subject. “The museum is one place to search. But, uh, Jason, you said there were two?”

Jason’s smile faded. Whatever he was thinking about, Annabeth could tell it wasn’t pleasant.

“Yeah,” he said. “The other place is called the Battery—it’s a park right by the harbor. The last time I was there...with Reyna...” He glanced at Piper, then rushed on. “We saw something in the park. A ghost or

some sort of spirit, like a Southern belle from the Civil War, glowing and floating along. We tried to approach it, but it disappeared whenever we got close. Then Reyna had this feeling—she said she should try it alone. Like maybe it would only talk to a girl. She went up to the spirit by herself, and sure enough, it spoke to her.”

Everyone waited.

“What did it say?” Annabeth asked.

“Reyna wouldn’t tell me,” Jason admitted. “But it must have been important. She seemed...shaken up. Maybe she got a prophecy or some bad news. Reyna never acted the same around me after that.”

Annabeth considered that. After their experience with the eidolons, she didn’t like the idea of approaching a ghost, especially one that changed people with bad news or prophecies. On the other hand, her mom was the goddess of knowledge, and knowledge was the most powerful weapon. Annabeth couldn’t turn down a possible source of information.

“A girls’ adventure, then,” Annabeth said. “Piper and Hazel can come with me.”

Both nodded, though Hazel looked nervous. No doubt her time in the Underworld had given her enough ghost experiences for two lifetimes. Piper’s eyes flashed defiantly, like anything Reyna could do, she could do.

Annabeth realized that if six of them went on these two quests, it would leave Percy alone on the ship with Coach Hedge, which was maybe not a situation a caring girlfriend should put him in. Nor was she eager to let Percy out of her sight again—not after they’d been apart for so many months. On the other hand, Percy looked so troubled by his experience with those imprisoned sea creatures, she thought maybe he could use a rest. She met his eyes, asking him a silent question. He nodded as if to say, *Yeah. It’ll be fine.*

“So that’s settled.” Annabeth turned to Leo, who was studying his console, listening to Festus creak and click over the intercom. “Leo, how long until we reach Charleston?”

“Good question,” he muttered. “Festus just detected a large group of eagles behind us—long-range radar, still not in sight.”

Piper leaned over the console. “Are you sure they’re Roman?”

Leo rolled his eyes. “No, Pipes. It could be a random group of giant eagles flying in perfect formation. Of course they’re Roman! I suppose we could turn the ship around and fight—”

“Which would be a very bad idea,” Jason said, “and remove any doubt that we’re enemies of Rome.”

“Or I’ve got another idea,” Leo said. “If we went straight to Charleston, we could be there in a few hours.

But the eagles would overtake us, and things would get complicated. *Instead*, we could send out a decoy to trick the eagles. We take the ship on a detour, go the long way to Charleston, and get there tomorrow morning—”

Hazel started to protest, but Leo raised his hand. “I know, I know. Nico’s in trouble and we have to hurry.”

“It’s June twenty-seventh,” Hazel said. “After today, four more days. Then he dies.”

“I know! But this might throw the Romans off our trail. We still should have enough time to reach Rome.”

Hazel scowled. “When you say *should have enough*...”

Leo shrugged. “How do you feel about *barely enough*?”

Hazel put her face in her hands for a count of three. “Sounds about typical for us.”

Annabeth decided to take that as a green light. “Okay, Leo. What kind of decoy are we talking about?”

“I’m so glad you asked!” He punched a few buttons on the console, rotated the turntable, and repeatedly pressed the *A* button on his Wii controller really, really fast. He called into the intercom, “Buford? Report for duty, please.”

Frank took a step back. “There’s somebody else on the ship? Who is Buford?”

A puff of steam shot from the stairwell, and Leo’s

automatic table climbed on deck.

Annabeth hadn't seen much of Buford during the trip. He mostly stayed in the engine room. (Leo insisted that Buford had a secret crush on the engine.) He was a three-legged table with a mahogany top. His bronze base had several drawers, spinning gears, and a set of steam vents. Buford was toting a bag like a mail sack tied to one of his legs. He clattered to the helm and made a sound like a train whistle.

"This is Buford," Leo announced.

"You name your furniture?" Frank asked.

Leo snorted. "Man, you just *wish* you had furniture this cool. Buford, are you ready for Operation End Table?"

Buford spewed steam. He stepped to the railing. His mahogany top split into four pie slices, which elongated into wooden blades. The blades spun, and Buford took off.

"A helicopter table," Percy muttered. "Gotta admit, that's cool. What's in the bag?"

"Dirty demigod laundry," Leo said. "I hope you don't mind, Frank."

Frank choked. "What?"

"It'll throw the eagles off our scent."

"Those were my only extra pants!"

Leo shrugged. "I asked Buford to get them laundered and folded while he's out. Hopefully he

will.” He rubbed his hands and grinned. “Well! I call that a good day’s work. I’m gonna calculate our detour route now. See you all at dinner!”

Percy passed out early, which left Annabeth with nothing to do in the evening except stare at her computer.

She’d brought Daedalus’s laptop with her, of course. Two years ago, she’d inherited the machine from the greatest inventor of all time, and it was loaded with invention ideas, schematics, and diagrams, most of which Annabeth was still trying to figure out. After two years, a typical laptop would have been out of date, but Annabeth figured Daedalus’s machine was still about fifty years ahead of its time. It could expand into a full-size laptop, shrink into a tablet computer, or fold into a wafer of metal smaller than a cell phone. It ran faster than any computer she’d ever had, could access satellites or Hephaestus-TV broadcasts from Mount Olympus, and ran custom-made programs that could do just about anything except tie shoelaces. There might have been an app for that, too, but Annabeth hadn’t found it yet.

She sat on her bunk, using one of Daedalus’s 3-D-rendering programs to study a model of the Parthenon in Athens. She’d always yearned to visit it, both because she loved architecture and because it was the

most famous temple to her mother.

Now she might get her wish, if they lived long enough to reach Greece. But the more she thought about the Mark of Athena, and the old Roman legend Reyna had mentioned, the more nervous she got.

She didn't want to, but she recalled her argument with her mother. Even after so many weeks, the words still stung.

Annabeth had been riding the subway back from the Upper East Side after visiting Percy's mom. During those long months when Percy was missing, Annabeth made the trip at least once a week—partly to give Sally Jackson and her husband Paul an update on the search, and partly because Annabeth and Sally needed to lift each other's spirits and convince one another that Percy would be fine.

The spring had been especially hard. By then, Annabeth had reason to hope Percy was alive, since Hera's plan seemed to involve sending him to the Roman side, but she couldn't be sure where he was. Jason had remembered his old camp's location more or less, but all the Greeks' magic—even that of the campers of Hecate's cabin—couldn't confirm that Percy was there, or anywhere. He seemed to have disappeared from the planet. Rachel the Oracle had tried to read the future, and while she couldn't see much, she'd been certain that Leo needed to finish the

Argo II before they could contact the Romans.

Nevertheless, Annabeth had spent every spare moment scouring all sources for any rumors of Percy. She had talked to nature spirits, read legends about Rome, dug for clues on Daedalus's notebook, and spent hundreds of golden drachmas on Iris-messages to every friendly spirit, demigod, or monster she'd ever met, all with no luck.

That particular afternoon, coming back from Sally's, Annabeth had felt even more drained than usual. She and Sally had first cried and then attempted to pull themselves together, but their nerves were frayed. Finally Annabeth took the Lexington Avenue subway down to Grand Central.

There were other ways to get back to her high school dorm from the Upper East Side, but Annabeth liked going through Grand Central Terminal. The beautiful design and the vast open space reminded her of Mount Olympus. Grand buildings made her feel better—maybe because being in a place so permanent made *her* feel more permanent.

She had just passed Sweet on America, the candy shop where Percy's mom used to work, and was thinking about going inside to buy some blue candy for old times' sake, when she saw Athena studying the subway map on the wall.

"Mother!" Annabeth couldn't believe it. She hadn't

seen her mom in months—not since Zeus had closed the gates of Olympus and forbidden all communication with demigods.

Many times, Annabeth had tried to call on her mom anyway, pleading for guidance, sending up burnt offerings with every meal at camp. She'd had no response. Now here was Athena, dressed in jeans and hiking boots and a red flannel shirt, her dark hair cascading over her shoulders. She held a backpack and a walking stick like she was prepared for a long journey.

"I must return home," Athena murmured, studying the map. "The way is complex. I wish Odysseus were here. He would understand."

"Mom!" Annabeth said. "Athena!"

The goddess turned. She seemed to look right through Annabeth with no recognition.

"That was my name," the goddess said dreamily. "Before they sacked my city, took my identity, made me *this*." She looked at her clothes in disgust. "I must return home."

Annabeth stepped back in shock. "You're...you're Minerva?"

"Don't call me that!" The goddess's gray eyes flared with anger. "I used to carry a spear and a shield. I held victory in the palm of my hand. I was so much more than this."

“Mom.” Annabeth’s voice trembled. “It’s me, Annabeth. Your *daughter*.”

“My daughter...” Athena repeated. “Yes, my children will avenge me. They must destroy the Romans. Horrible, dishonorable, copycat Romans. Hera argued that we must keep the two camps apart. I said, No, let them fight. Let my children destroy the usurpers.”

Annabeth’s heartbeat thumped in her ears. “You *wanted* that? But you’re wise. You understand warfare better than any—”

“Once!” the goddess said. “Replaced. Sacked. Looted like a trophy and carted off—away from my beloved homeland. I lost so much. I swore I would never forgive. Neither would my children.” She focused more closely on Annabeth. “You are my daughter?”

“Yes.”

The goddess fished something from the pocket of her shirt—an old-fashioned subway token—and pressed it into Annabeth’s hand.

“Follow the Mark of Athena,” the goddess said. “Avenge me.”

Annabeth had looked at the coin. As she watched, it changed from a New York subway token to an ancient silver drachma, the kind used by Athenians. It showed an owl, Athena’s sacred animal, with an olive branch

on one side and a Greek inscription on the other.

The Mark of Athena.

At the time, Annabeth had had no idea what it meant. She didn't understand why her mom was acting like this. Minerva or not, she shouldn't be so confused.

"Mom..." She tried to make her tone as reasonable as possible. "Percy is missing. I need your help." She had started to explain Hera's plan for bringing the camps together to battle Gaea and the giants, but the goddess stamped her walking stick against the marble floor.

"Never!" she said. "Anyone who helps Rome must perish. If you would join them, you are no child of mine. You have already failed me."

"Mother!"

"I care nothing about this *Percy*. If he has gone over to the Romans, let him perish. Kill him. Kill all the Romans. Find the Mark, follow it to its source. Witness how Rome has disgraced me, and pledge your vengeance."

"Athena isn't the goddess of revenge." Annabeth's nails bit into her palms. The silver coin seemed to grow warmer in her hand. "Percy is everything to me."

"And revenge is everything to me," the goddess snarled. "Which of us is wiser?"

"Something is *wrong* with you. What's happened?"

"Rome happened!" the goddess said bitterly. "See

what they have done, making a *Roman* of me. They wish me to be their goddess? Then let them taste their own evil. Kill them, child.”

“No!”

“Then you are nothing.” The goddess turned to the subway map. Her expression softened, becoming confused and unfocused. “If I could find the route... the way home, then perhaps— But, no. Avenge me or leave me. You are no child of mine.”

Annabeth’s eyes stung. She thought of a thousand horrible things she wanted to say, but she couldn’t. She had turned and fled.

She’d tried to throw away the silver coin, but it simply reappeared in her pocket, the way Riptide did for Percy. Unfortunately, Annabeth’s drachma had no magical powers—at least nothing useful. It only gave her nightmares, and no matter what she tried, she couldn’t get rid of it.

Now, sitting in her cabin aboard the *Argo II*, she could feel the coin growing warm in her pocket. She stared at the model of the Parthenon on her computer screen and thought about the argument with Athena. Phrases she’d heard over the last few days swirled in her head: *A talented friend, ready for her visitor. No one will retrieve that statue. Wisdom’s daughter walks alone.*

She was afraid she finally understood what it all

meant. She prayed to the gods that she was wrong.

A knock on her door made her jump.

She hoped it might be Percy, but instead Frank Zhang poked his head in.

“Um, sorry,” he said. “Could I—?”

She was so startled to see him, it took her a moment to realize he wanted to come in.

“Sure,” she said. “Yes.”

He stepped inside, looking around the cabin. There wasn’t much to see. On her desk sat a stack of books, a journal and pen, and a picture of her dad flying his Sopwith Camel biplane, grinning and giving the thumbs-up. Annabeth liked that photo. It reminded her of the time she’d felt closest to him, when he’d strafed an army of monsters with Celestial bronze machine guns just to protect her—pretty much the best present a girl could hope for.

Hanging from a hook on the wall was her New York Yankees cap, her most prized possession from her mom. Once, the cap had had the power to turn its wearer invisible. Since Annabeth’s argument with Athena, the cap had lost its magic. Annabeth wasn’t sure why, but she’d stubbornly brought it along on the quest. Every morning she would try it on, hoping it would work again. So far it had only served as a reminder of her mother’s wrath.

Otherwise, her cabin was bare. She kept it clean

and simple, which helped her to think. Percy didn't believe it because she always made excellent grades, but like most demigods, she was ADHD. When there were too many distractions in her personal space, she was never able to focus.

"So...Frank," she ventured. "What can I do for you?"

Out of all the kids on the ship, Frank was the one she thought least likely to pay her a visit. She didn't feel any less confused when he blushed and pulled his Chinese handcuffs out of his pocket.

"I don't like being in the dark about this," he muttered. "Could you show me the trick? I didn't feel comfortable asking anyone else."

Annabeth processed his words with a slight delay. Wait...Frank was asking *her* for help? Then it dawned on her: of course, Frank was embarrassed. Leo had been razzing him pretty hard. Nobody liked being a laughingstock. Frank's determined expression said he never wanted that to happen again. He wanted to understand the puzzle, without the iguana solution.

Annabeth felt strangely honored. Frank trusted her not to make fun of him. Besides, she had a soft spot for anyone who was seeking knowledge—even about something as simple as Chinese handcuffs.

She patted the bunk next to her. "Absolutely. Sit down."

Frank sat on the edge of the mattress, as if preparing for a quick escape. Annabeth took the Chinese handcuffs and held them next to her computer.

She hit the key for an infrared scan. A few seconds later a 3-D model of the Chinese handcuffs appeared on the screen. She turned the laptop so that Frank could see.

“How did you do that?” he marveled.

“Cutting-edge Ancient Greek technology,” she said. “Okay, look. The structure is a cylindrical biaxial braid, so it has excellent resilience.” She manipulated the image so it squeezed in and out like an accordion. “When you put your fingers inside, it loosens. But when you try to remove them, the circumference shrinks as the braid catches and tightens. There’s no way you can pull free by struggling.”

Frank stared at her blankly. “But what’s the answer?”

“Well...” She showed him some of her calculations—how the handcuffs could resist tearing under incredible stress, depending on the material used in the braid. “Pretty amazing for a woven structure, right? Doctors use it for traction, and electrical contractors—”

“Uh, but the answer?”

Annabeth laughed. “You don’t fight *against* the handcuffs. You push your fingers in, not out. That loosens the braid.”

“Oh.” Frank tried it. It worked. “Thanks, but... couldn’t you have just shown me on the handcuffs without the 3-D program and the calculations?”

Annabeth hesitated. Sometimes wisdom came from strange places, even from giant teenaged goldfish. “I guess you’re right. That was silly. I learned something too.”

Frank tried the handcuffs again. “It’s easy when you know the solution.”

“Many of the best traps are simple,” Annabeth said. “You just have to think about it, and hope your victim doesn’t.”

Frank nodded. He seemed reluctant to leave.

“You know,” Annabeth said, “Leo doesn’t intend to be mean. He’s just got a big mouth. When people make him nervous, he uses humor as a defense.”

Frank frowned. “Why would I make him nervous?”

“You’re twice his size. You can turn into a dragon.” *And Hazel likes you*, Annabeth thought, though she didn’t say that.

Frank didn’t look convinced. “Leo can summon fire.” He twisted the handcuffs. “Annabeth... sometime, maybe could you help me with another problem that’s not so simple? I’ve got...I guess you’d call it an Achilles’ heel.”

Annabeth felt like she’d just had a drink of Roman hot chocolate. She’d never really gotten the term *warm*

and fuzzy, but Frank gave her that sensation. He was just a big teddy bear. She could see why Hazel liked him. “I’d be happy to,” she said. “Does anyone else know about this Achilles’ heel?”

“Percy and Hazel,” he said. “That’s it. Percy... he’s a really good guy. I would follow him anywhere. Thought you should know.”

Annabeth patted his arm. “Percy has a knack for picking good friends. Like you. But, Frank, you can trust anyone on this ship. Even Leo. We’re all a team. We have to trust each other.”

“I—I suppose.”

“So what’s the weakness you’re worried about?”

The dinner bell sounded, and Frank jumped.

“Maybe... maybe later,” he said. “It’s hard to talk about. But thanks, Annabeth.” He held up the Chinese handcuffs. “Keep it simple.”

ANNABETH

THAT NIGHT, ANNABETH SLEPT without nightmares, which just made her uneasy when she woke up—like the calm before a storm.

Leo docked the ship at a pier in Charleston Harbor, right next to the seawall. Along the shore was a historical district with tall mansions, palm trees, and wrought-iron fences. Antique cannons pointed at the water.

By the time Annabeth came up on deck, Jason, Frank, and Leo had already left for the museum. According to Coach Hedge, they'd promised to be back by sunset. Piper and Hazel were ready to go, but first Annabeth turned to Percy, who was leaning on the starboard rail, gazing over the bay.

Annabeth took his hand. "What are you going to do while we're gone?"

“Jump into the harbor,” he said casually, like another kid might say, *I’m going to get a snack*. “I want to try communicating with the local Nereids. Maybe they can give me some advice about how to free those captives in Atlanta. Besides, I think the sea might be good for me. Being in that aquarium made me feel... unclean.”

His hair was dark and tangled as usual, but Annabeth thought about the streak of gray he used to have on one side. When the two of them were fourteen, they’d taken turns (unwillingly) holding the weight of the sky. The strain left them both with some gray hair. Over the last year, while Percy had been missing, the gray streaks had finally disappeared from both of them, which made Annabeth sad and a little worried. She felt like she’d lost a symbolic bond with Percy.

Annabeth kissed him. “Good luck, Seaweed Brain. Just come back to me, okay?”

“I will,” he promised. “You do the same.”

Annabeth tried to push down her growing unease.

She turned to Piper and Hazel. “Okay, ladies. Let’s find the ghost of the Battery.”

Afterward, Annabeth wished she’d jumped into the harbor with Percy. She even would’ve preferred a museum full of ghosts.

Not that she minded hanging out with Hazel and

Piper. At first, they had a pretty good time walking along the Battery. According to the signs, the seaside park was called White Point Gardens. The ocean breeze swept away the muggy heat of the summer afternoon, and it was pleasantly cool under the shade of the palmetto trees. Lining the road were old Civil War cannons and bronze statues of historical figures, which made Annabeth shudder. She thought about the statues in New York City during the Titan War, which had come to life thanks to Daedalus's command sequence twenty-three. She wondered how many other statues around the country were secretly automatons, waiting to be triggered.

Charleston Harbor glittered in the sun. To the north and south, strips of land stretched out like arms enclosing the bay, and sitting in the mouth of the harbor, about a mile out, was an island with a stone fort. Annabeth had a vague memory of that fort being important in the Civil War, but she didn't spend much time thinking about it.

Mostly she breathed in the sea air and thought about Percy. Gods forbid she ever had to break up with him. She'd never be able to visit the sea again without remembering her broken heart. She was relieved when they turned away from the seawall and explored the inland side of the gardens.

The park wasn't crowded. Annabeth imagined that

most of the locals had gone on summer vacation, or were holed up at home taking a siesta. They strolled along South Battery Street, which was lined with four-story Colonial mansions. The brick walls were blanketed with ivy. The facades had soaring white columns like Roman temples. The front gardens were bursting with rosebushes, honeysuckle, and flowering bougainvillea. It looked like Demeter had set the timer on all the plants to *grow* several decades ago, then forgotten to come back and check on them.

“Kind of reminds me of New Rome,” Hazel said. “All the big mansions and the gardens. The columns and arches.”

Annabeth nodded. She remembered reading how the American South had often compared itself to Rome back before the Civil War. In the old days their society had been all about impressive architecture, honor, and codes of chivalry. And on the evil side, it had also been about slavery. *Rome had slaves*, some Southerners had argued, *so why shouldn't we?*

Annabeth shivered. She loved the architecture here. The houses and the gardens were very beautiful, very Roman. But she wondered why beautiful things had to be wrapped up with evil history. Or was it the other way around? Maybe the evil history made it necessary to build beautiful things, to mask the darker aspects.

She shook her head. Percy would hate her getting

so philosophical. If she tried to talk to him about stuff like that, his eyes glazed over.

The other girls didn't say much.

Piper kept looking around like she expected an ambush. She had said she'd seen this park in the blade of her knife, but she wouldn't elaborate. Annabeth guessed she was afraid to. After all, the last time Piper had tried to interpret a vision from her knife, Percy and Jason had almost killed each other in Kansas.

Hazel also seemed preoccupied. Maybe she was taking in their surroundings, or maybe she was worrying about her brother. In less than four days, unless they found him and freed him, Nico would be dead.

Annabeth felt that deadline weighing on her, too. She'd always had mixed feelings about Nico di Angelo. She suspected that he'd had a crush on her ever since they rescued him and his big sister Bianca from that military academy in Maine; but Annabeth had never felt any attraction to Nico. He was too young and too moody. There was a darkness in him that made her uneasy.

Still, she felt responsible for him. Back when they had met, neither of them had known about his half sister, Hazel. At the time, Bianca had been Nico's only living family. When she had died, Nico became a homeless orphan, drifting through the world alone.

Annabeth could relate to that.

She was so deep in thought, she might have kept walking around the park forever, but Piper grabbed her arm.

“There.” She pointed across the harbor. A hundred yards out, a shimmering white figure floated on the water. At first, Annabeth thought it might be a buoy or a small boat reflecting the sunlight, but it was definitely glowing, and it was moving more smoothly than a boat, making a straight line toward them. As it got closer, Annabeth could tell it was the figure of a woman.

“The ghost,” she said.

“That’s not a ghost,” Hazel said. “No kind of spirit glows that brightly.”

Annabeth decided to take her word for it. She couldn’t imagine being Hazel, dying at such a young age and coming back from the Underworld, knowing more about the dead than the living.

As if in a trance, Piper walked across the street toward the edge of the seawall, narrowly avoiding a horse-drawn carriage.

“Piper!” Annabeth called.

“We’d better follow her,” Hazel said.

By the time Annabeth and Hazel caught up to her, the ghostly apparition was only a few yards away.

Piper glared at it like the sight offended her.

“It *is* her,” she grumbled.

Annabeth squinted at the ghost, but it blazed too brightly to make out details. Then the apparition floated up the seawall and stopped in front of them. The glow faded.

Annabeth gasped. The woman was breathtakingly beautiful and strangely familiar. Her face was hard to describe. Her features seemed to shift from those of one glamorous movie star to another. Her eyes sparkled playfully—sometimes green or blue or amber. Her hair changed from long, straight blond to dark chocolatey curls.

Annabeth was instantly jealous. She'd always wished she had dark hair. She felt like nobody took her seriously as a blonde. She had to work twice as hard to get recognition as a strategist, an architect, a senior counselor—anything that had to do with brains.

The woman was dressed like a Southern belle, just as Jason had described. Her gown had a low-cut bodice of pink silk and a three-tiered hoop skirt with white scalloped lace. She wore tall white silk gloves, and held a feathered pink-and-white fan to her chest.

Everything about her seemed calculated to make Annabeth feel inadequate: the easy grace with which she wore her dress, the perfect yet understated makeup, the way she radiated feminine charm that no man could possibly resist.

Annabeth realized that her jealousy was irrational.

The woman was *making* her feel this way. She'd had this experience before. She recognized this woman, even though her face changed by the second, becoming more and more beautiful.

"Aphrodite," she said.

"Venus?" Hazel asked in amazement.

"Mom," Piper said, with no enthusiasm.

"Girls!" The goddess spread her arms like she wanted a group hug.

The three demigods did not oblige. Hazel backed into a palmetto tree.

"I'm so glad you're here," Aphrodite said. "War is coming. Bloodshed is inevitable. So there's really only one thing to do."

"Uh... and that is?" Annabeth ventured.

"Why, have tea and chat, obviously. Come with me!"

Aphrodite knew how to do tea.

She led them to the central pavilion in the gardens—a white-pillared gazebo, where a table was set with silverware, china cups, and of course a steaming pot of tea, the fragrance shifting as easily as Aphrodite's appearance—sometimes cinnamon, or jasmine, or mint. There were plates of scones, cookies, and muffins, fresh butter and jam—all of which, Annabeth figured, were incredibly fattening; unless, of course, you were

the immortal goddess of love.

Aphrodite sat—or held court, rather—in a wicker peacock chair. She poured tea and served cakes without getting a speck on her clothes, her posture always perfect, her smile dazzling.

Annabeth hated her more and more the longer they sat.

“Oh, my sweet girls,” the goddess said. “I do love - Charleston! The weddings I’ve attended in this gazebo—they bring tears to my eyes. And the elegant balls in the days of the Old South. Ah, they were lovely. Many of these mansions still have statues of me in their gardens, though they called me Venus.”

“Which are you?” Annabeth asked. “Venus or Aphrodite?”

The goddess sipped her tea. Her eyes sparkled mischievously. “Annabeth Chase, you’ve grown into quite a beautiful young lady. You really should do something with your hair, though. And, Hazel Levesque, your clothes—”

“My clothes?” Hazel looked down at her rumpled denim, not self-consciously, but baffled, as if she couldn’t imagine what was wrong with them.

“Mother!” Piper said. “You’re embarrassing me.”

“Well, I don’t see why,” the goddess said. “Just because *you* don’t appreciate my fashion tips, Piper, doesn’t mean the others won’t. I could do a quick

makeover for Annabeth and Hazel, perhaps silk ball gowns like mine—”

“Mother!”

“Fine,” Aphrodite sighed. “To answer your question, Annabeth, I am *both* Aphrodite and Venus. Unlike many of my fellow Olympians, I changed hardly at all from one age to the other. In fact, I like to think I haven’t aged a bit!” Her fingers fluttered around her face appreciatively. “Love is love, after all, whether you’re Greek or Roman. This civil war won’t affect me as much as it will the others.”

Wonderful, Annabeth thought. Her own mother, the most levelheaded Olympian, was reduced to a raving, vicious scatterbrain in a subway station. And of all the gods who might help them, the only ones not affected by the Greek–Roman schism seemed to be Aphrodite, Nemesis, and Dionysus. Love, revenge, wine. Very helpful.

Hazel nibbled a sugar cookie. “We’re not in a war yet, my lady.”

“Oh, dear Hazel.” Aphrodite folded her fan. “Such optimism, yet you have heartrending days ahead of you. Of *course* war is coming. Love and war always go together. They are the peaks of human emotion! Evil and good, beauty and ugliness.”

She smiled at Annabeth as if she knew what Annabeth had been thinking earlier about the Old

South.

Hazel set down her sugar cookie. She had a few crumbs on her chin, and Annabeth liked the fact that Hazel either didn't know or didn't care.

"What do you mean," Hazel asked, "heartrending days?"

The goddess laughed as if Hazel were a cute puppy. "Well, Annabeth could give you some idea. I once promised to make *her* love life interesting. And didn't I?"

Annabeth almost snapped the handle off her teacup. For years, her heart had been torn. First there was Luke Castellan, her first crush, who had seen her only as a little sister; then he'd turned evil and decided he liked her—right before he died. Next came Percy, who was infuriating but sweet, yet he had seemed to be falling for another girl named Rachel, and then *he* almost died, several times. Finally Annabeth had gotten Percy to herself, only to have him vanish for six months and lose his memory.

"Interesting," Annabeth said, "is a mild way of putting it."

"Well, I can't take credit for *all* your troubles," the goddess said. "But I do love twists and turns in a love story. Oh, all of you are such excellent stories—I mean, girls. You do me proud!"

"Mother," Piper said, "is there a reason you're

here?”

“Hmm? Oh, you mean besides the tea? I often come here. I love the view, the food, the atmosphere—you can just smell the romance and heartbreak in the air, can’t you? Centuries of it.”

She pointed to a nearby mansion. “Do you see that rooftop balcony? We had a party there the night the American Civil War began. The shelling of Fort Sumter.”

“That’s it,” Annabeth remembered. “The island in the harbor. That’s where the first fighting of the Civil War happened. The Confederates shelled the Union troops and took the fort.”

“Oh, such a party!” Aphrodite said. “A string quartet, and all the men in their elegant new officers’ uniforms. The women’s dresses—you should’ve seen them! I danced with Ares—or was he Mars? I’m afraid I was a little giddy. And the beautiful bursts of light across the harbor, the roar of the cannons giving the men an excuse to put their arms around their frightened sweethearts!”

Annabeth’s tea was cold. She hadn’t eaten anything, but she felt like she wanted to throw up. “You’re talking about the beginning of the bloodiest war in U.S. history. Over six hundred thousand people died—more Americans than in World War One and World War Two combined.”

“And the refreshments!” Aphrodite continued. “Ah, they were divine. General Beauregard himself made an appearance. He was such a scoundrel. He was on his second wife, then, but you should have seen the way he looked at Lisbeth Cooper—”

“Mother!” Piper tossed her scone to the pigeons.

“Yes, sorry,” the goddess said. “To make the story short, I’m here to help you, girls. I doubt you’ll be seeing Hera much. Your little quest has hardly made her welcome in the throne room. And the other gods are rather indisposed, as you know, torn between their Roman and Greek sides. Some more than others.” Aphrodite fixed her gaze on Annabeth. “I suppose you’ve told your friends about your falling-out with your mother?”

Heat rose to Annabeth’s cheeks. Hazel and Piper looked at her curiously.

“Falling-out?” Hazel asked.

“An argument,” Annabeth said. “It’s nothing.”

“Nothing!” the goddess said. “Well, I don’t know about that. Athena was the most Greek of all goddesses. The patron of Athens, after all. When the Romans took over...oh, they adopted Athena after a fashion. She became Minerva, the goddess of crafts and cleverness. But the Romans had *other* war gods who were more to their taste, more reliably Roman—like Bellona—”

“Reyna’s mom,” Piper muttered.

“Yes, indeed,” the goddess agreed. “I had a lovely talk with Reyna a while back, right here in the park. And the Romans had Mars, of course. And later, there was Mithras—not even properly Greek or Roman, but the legionnaires were crazy about his cult. I always found him crass and terribly *nouveau dieu*, personally. At any rate, the Romans quite sidelined poor Athena. They took away most of her military importance. The Greeks never forgave the Romans for that insult. Neither did Athena.”

Annabeth’s ears buzzed.

“The Mark of Athena,” she said. “It leads to a statue, doesn’t it? It leads to... to *the* statue.”

Aphrodite smiled. “You are clever, like your mother. Understand, though, your siblings, the children of Athena, have been searching for centuries. None has succeeded in recovering the statue. In the meantime, they’ve been keeping alive the Greek feud with the Romans. Every civil war...so much bloodshed and heartbreak...has been orchestrated largely by Athena’s children.”

“That’s...” Annabeth wanted to say *impossible*, but she remembered Athena’s bitter words in Grand Central Station, the burning hatred in her eyes.

“Romantic?” Aphrodite offered. “Yes, I supposed it is.”

“But...” Annabeth tried to clear the fog from her

brain. “The Mark of Athena, how does it work? Is it a series of clues, or a trail set by Athena—”

“Hmm.” Aphrodite looked politely bored. “I couldn’t say. I don’t believe Athena created the Mark consciously. If she knew where her statue was, she’d simply tell you where to find it. No...I’d guess the Mark is more like a spiritual trail of bread crumbs. It’s a connection between the statue and the children of the goddess. The statue *wants* to be found, you see, but it can only be freed by the most worthy.”

“And for thousands of years,” Annabeth said, “no one has managed.”

“Hold on,” Piper said. “What *statue* are we talking about?”

The goddess laughed. “Oh, I’m sure Annabeth can fill you in. At any rate, the clue you need is close by: a map of sorts, left by the children of Athena in 1861—a remembrance that will start you on your path, once you reach Rome. But as you said, Annabeth Chase, no one has ever succeeded in following the Mark of Athena to its end. There you will face your worst fear—the fear of every child of Athena. And even if you survive, how will you use your reward? For war or for peace?”

Annabeth was glad for the tablecloth, because under the table, her legs were trembling. “This map,” she said, “where is it?”

“Guys!” Hazel pointed to the sky.

Circling above the palmetto trees were two large eagles. Higher up, descending rapidly, was a flying chariot pulled by pegasi. Apparently Leo's diversion with Buford the end table hadn't worked—at least not for long.

Aphrodite spread butter on a muffin as if she had all the time in the world. "Oh, the map is at Fort Sumter, of course." She pointed her butter knife toward the island across the harbor. "It looks like the Romans have arrived to cut you off. I'd get back to your ship in a hurry if I were you. Would you care for some tea cakes to go?"

ANNABETH

THEY DIDN'T MAKE IT TO THE SHIP.

Halfway across the dock, three giant eagles descended in front of them. Each deposited a Roman commando in purple and denim with glittering gold armor, sword, and shield. The eagles flew away, and the Roman in the middle, who was scrawnier than the others, raised his visor.

“Surrender to Rome!” Octavian shrieked.

Hazel drew her cavalry sword and grumbled, “Fat chance, Octavian.”

Annabeth cursed under her breath. By himself, the skinny augur wouldn't have bothered her, but the two other guys looked like seasoned warriors—a lot bigger and stronger than Annabeth wanted to deal with, especially since Piper and she were armed only with daggers.

Piper raised her hands in a placating gesture.

“Octavian, what happened at camp was a setup. We can explain.”

“Can’t hear you!” Octavian yelled. “Wax in our ears—standard procedure when battling evil sirens. Now, throw down your weapons and turn around slowly so I can bind your hands.”

“Let me skewer him,” Hazel muttered. “Please.”

The ship was only fifty feet away, but Annabeth saw no sign of Coach Hedge on deck. He was probably below, watching his stupid martial arts programs. Jason’s group wasn’t due back until sunset, and Percy would be underwater, unaware of the invasion. If Annabeth could get on board, she could use the ballistae; but there was no way to get around these three Romans.

She was running out of time. The eagles circled overhead, crying out as if to alert their brethren: *Hey, some tasty Greek demigods over here!* Annabeth couldn’t see the flying chariot anymore, but she assumed it was close by. She had to figure out something before more Romans arrived.

She needed help...some kind of distress signal to Coach Hedge, or even better—Percy.

“Well?” Octavian demanded. His two friends brandished their swords.

Very slowly, using only two fingers, Annabeth drew her dagger. Instead of dropping it, she tossed it as

far as she could into the water.

Octavian made a squeaking sound. “What was that for? I didn’t say *toss* it! That could’ve been evidence. Or spoils of war!”

Annabeth tried for a dumb-blonde smile, like: *Oh, silly me*. Nobody who knew her would have been fooled. But Octavian seemed to buy it. He huffed in exasperation.

“You other two...” He pointed his blade at Hazel and Piper. “Put your weapons on the dock. No funny bus—”

All around the Romans, Charleston Harbor erupted like a Las Vegas fountain putting on a show. When the wall of seawater subsided, the three Romans were in the bay, spluttering and frantically trying to stay afloat in their armor. Percy stood on the dock, holding Annabeth’s dagger.

“You dropped this,” he said, totally poker-faced.

Annabeth threw her arms around him. “I love you!”

“Guys,” Hazel interrupted. She had a little smile on her face. “We need to hurry.”

Down in the water, Octavian yelled, “Get me out of here! I’ll kill you!”

“Tempting,” Percy called down.

“What?” Octavian shouted. He was holding on to one of his guards, who was having trouble keeping them both afloat.

“Nothing!” Percy shouted back. “Let’s go, guys.”

Hazel frowned. “We can’t let them drown, can we?”

“They won’t,” Percy promised. “I’ve got the water circulating around their feet. As soon as we’re out of range, I’ll spit them ashore.”

Piper grinned. “Nice.”

They climbed aboard the *Argo II*, and Annabeth ran to the helm. “Piper, get below. Use the sink in the galley for an Iris-message. Warn Jason to get back here!”

Piper nodded and raced off.

“Hazel, go find Coach Hedge and tell him to get his furry hindquarters on deck!”

“Right!”

“And Percy—you and I need to get this ship to Fort Sumter.”

Percy nodded and ran to the mast. Annabeth took the helm. Her hands flew across the controls. She’d just have to hope she knew enough to operate them.

Annabeth had seen Percy control full-sized sailing ships before with only his willpower. This time, he didn’t disappoint. Ropes flew on their own—releasing the dock ties, weighing the anchor. The sails unfurled and caught the wind. Meanwhile Annabeth fired the engine. The oars extended with a sound like machine-gun fire, and the *Argo II* turned from the dock, heading

for the island in the distance.

The three eagles still circled overhead, but they made no attempt to land on the ship, probably because Festus the figurehead blew fire whenever they got close. More eagles were flying in formation toward Fort Sumter—at least a dozen. If each of them carried a Roman demigod... that was a lot of enemies.

Coach Hedge came pounding up the stairs with Hazel at his hooves.

“Where are they?” he demanded. “Who do I kill?”

“No killing!” Annabeth ordered. “Just defend the ship!”

“But they interrupted a Chuck Norris movie!”

Piper emerged from below. “Got a message through to Jason. Kind of fuzzy, but he’s already on his way. He should be—oh! There!”

Soaring over the city, heading in their direction, was a giant bald eagle, unlike the golden Roman birds.

“Frank!” Hazel said.

Leo was holding on to the eagle’s feet, and even from the ship, Annabeth could hear him screaming and cursing.

Behind them flew Jason, riding the wind.

“Never seen Jason fly before,” Percy grumbled. “He looks like a blond Superman.”

“This isn’t the time!” Piper scolded him. “Look, they’re in trouble!”

Sure enough, the Roman flying chariot had descended from a cloud and was diving straight toward them. Jason and Frank veered out of the way, pulling up to avoid getting trampled by the pegasi. The charioteers fired their bows. Arrows whistled under Leo's feet, which led to more screaming and cursing. Jason and Frank were forced to overshoot the *Argo II* and fly toward Fort Sumter.

"I'll get 'em!" yelled Coach Hedge.

He spun the port ballista. Before Annabeth could yell, "Don't be stupid!" Hedge fired. A flaming spear rocketed toward the chariot.

It exploded over the heads of the pegasi and threw them into a panic. Unfortunately it also singed Frank's wings and sent him spiraling out of control. Leo slipped from his grasp. The chariot shot toward Fort Sumter, slamming into Jason.

Annabeth watched in horror as Jason—obviously dazed and in pain—lunged for Leo, caught him, then struggled to gain altitude. He only managed to slow their fall. They disappeared behind the ramparts of the fort. Frank tumbled after them. Then the chariot dropped somewhere inside and hit with a bone-shattering *CRACK!* One broken wheel spun into the air.

"Coach!" Piper screamed.

"What?" Hedge demanded. "That was just a warning shot!"

Annabeth gunned the engines. The hull shuddered as they picked up speed. The docks of the island were only a hundred yards away now, but a dozen more eagles were soaring overhead, each carrying a Roman demigod in its claws.

The *Argo II*'s crew would be outnumbered at least three to one.

"Percy," Annabeth said, "we're going to come in hard. I need you to control the water so we don't smash into the docks. Once we're there, you're going to have to hold off the attackers. The rest of you help him guard the ship."

"But—Jason!" Piper said.

"Frank and Leo!" Hazel added.

"I'll find them," Annabeth promised. "I've got to figure out where the map is. And I'm pretty sure I'm the only one who can do that."

"The fort is crawling with Romans," Percy warned. "You'll have to fight your way through, find our friends—assuming they're okay—find this map, and get everybody back alive. All on your own?"

"Just an average day," Annabeth kissed him. "Whatever you do, don't let them take this ship!"

X X

ANNABETH

THE NEW CIVIL WAR HAD BEGUN.

Leo had somehow escaped his fall unharmed. Annabeth saw him ducking from portico to portico, blasting fire at the giant eagles swooping down on him. Roman demigods tried to chase him, tripping over piles of cannonballs and dodging tourists, who screamed and ran in circles.

Tour guides kept yelling, “It’s just a reenactment!” Though they didn’t sound sure. The Mist could only do so much to change what mortals saw.

In the middle of the courtyard, a full-grown elephant—could that be Frank?—rampaged around the flagpoles, scattering Roman warriors. Jason stood about fifty yards away, sword-fighting with a stocky centurion whose lips were stained cherry red, like blood. A wannabe vampire, or maybe a Kool-Aid

freak?

As Annabeth watched, Jason yelled, “Sorry about this, Dakota!”

He vaulted straight over the centurion’s head like an acrobat and slammed the hilt of his *gladius* into the back of the Roman’s head. Dakota crumpled.

“Jason!” Annabeth called.

He scanned the battlefield until he saw her.

She pointed to where the *Argo II* was docked. “Get the others aboard! Retreat!”

“What about you?” he called.

“Don’t wait for me!”

Annabeth bolted off before he could protest.

She had a hard time maneuvering through the mobs of tourists. Why did so many people want to see Fort Sumter on a sweltering summer day? But Annabeth quickly realized the crowds had saved their lives. Without the chaos of all these panicked mortals, the Romans would have already surrounded their outnumbered crew.

Annabeth dodged into a small room that must have been part of the garrison. She tried to steady her breathing. She imagined what it would have been like to be a Union soldier on this island in 1861. Surrounded by enemies. Dwindling food and supplies, no reinforcements coming.

Some of the Union defenders had been children of

Athena. They'd hidden an important map here—something they didn't want falling into enemy hands. If Annabeth had been one of those demigods, where would she have put it?

Suddenly the walls glistened. The air became warm. Annabeth wondered if she was hallucinating. She was about to run for the exit when the door slammed shut. The mortar between the stones blistered. The bubbles popped, and thousands of tiny black spiders swelled forth.

Annabeth couldn't move. Her heart seemed to have stopped. The spiders blanketed the walls, crawling over one another, spreading across the floor and gradually surrounding her. It was impossible. This couldn't be *real*.

Terror plunged her into memories. She was seven years old again, alone in her bedroom in Richmond, Virginia. The spiders came at night. They crawled in waves from her closet and waited in the shadows. She yelled for her father, but her father was away for work. He *always* seemed to be away for work.

Her stepmother came instead.

I don't mind being the bad cop, she had once told Annabeth's father, when she didn't think Annabeth could hear.

It's only your imagination, her stepmother said about the spiders. *You're scaring your baby brothers*.

They're not my brothers, Annabeth argued, which made her stepmother's expression harden. Her eyes were almost as scary as the spiders.

Go to sleep now, her stepmother insisted. *No more screaming.*

The spiders came back as soon as her stepmother had left the room. Annabeth tried to hide under the covers, but it was no good. Eventually she fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. She woke up in the morning, freckled with bites, cobwebs covering her eyes, her mouth, and nose.

The bites faded before she even got dressed, so she had nothing to show her stepmother except cobwebs, which her stepmother thought was some sort of clever trick.

No more talk of spiders, her stepmother said firmly. *You're a big girl now.*

The second night, the spiders came again. Her stepmother continued to be the bad cop. Annabeth wasn't allowed to call her father and bother him with this nonsense. No, he would *not* come home early.

The third night, Annabeth ran away from home.

Later, at Camp Half-Blood, she learned that all children of Athena feared spiders. Long ago, Athena had taught the mortal weaver Arachne a hard lesson—cursing her for her pride by turning her into the first spider. Ever since, spiders had hated the children of

Athena.

But that didn't make her fear easier to deal with. Once, she'd almost killed Connor Stoll at camp for putting a tarantula in her bunk. Years later, she'd had a panic attack at a water park in Denver, when Percy and she were assaulted by mechanical spiders. And the past few weeks, Annabeth had dreamed of spiders almost every night—crawling over her, suffocating her, wrapping her in webs.

Now, standing in the barracks at Fort Sumter, she was surrounded. Her nightmares had come true.

A sleepy voice murmured in her head: *Soon, my dear. You will meet the weaver soon.*

"Gaea?" Annabeth murmured. She feared the answer, but she asked: "Who—who is the weaver?"

The spiders became excited, swarming over the walls, swirling around Annabeth's feet like a glistening black whirlpool. Only the hope that it might be an illusion kept Annabeth from passing out from fear.

I hope you survive, child, the woman's voice said. *I would prefer you as my sacrifice. But we must let the weaver take her revenge...*

Gaea's voice faded. On the far wall, in the center of the spider swarm, a red symbol blazed to life: the figure of an owl like the one on the silver drachma, staring straight at Annabeth. Then, just as in her nightmares, the Mark of Athena burned across the walls,

incinerating the spiders until the room was empty except for the smell of sickly sweet ashes.

Go, said a new voice—Annabeth’s mother. *Avenge me. Follow the Mark.*

The blazing symbol of the owl faded. The garrison door burst open. Annabeth stood stunned in the middle of the room, unsure whether she’d seen something real, or just a vision.

An explosion shook the building. Annabeth remembered that her friends were in danger. She’d stayed here much too long.

She forced herself to move. Still trembling, she stumbled outside. The ocean air helped clear her mind. She gazed across the courtyard—past the panicked tourists and fighting demigods—to the edge of the battlements, where a large mortar pointed out to sea.

It might have been Annabeth’s imagination, but the old artillery piece seemed to be glowing red. She dashed toward it. An eagle swooped at her, but she ducked and kept running. Nothing could possibly scare her as much as those spiders.

Roman demigods had formed ranks and were advancing toward the *Argo II*, but a miniature storm had gathered over their heads. Though the day was clear all around them, thunder rumbled, and lightning flashed above the Romans. Rain and wind pushed them back.

Annabeth didn't stop to think about it.

She reached the mortar and put her hand on the muzzle. On the plug that blocked the opening, the Mark of Athena began to glow—the red outline of an owl.

"In the mortar," she said. "Of course."

She pried at the plug with her fingers. No luck. Cursing, she drew her dagger. As soon as the Celestial bronze touched the plug, the plug shrank and loosened. Annabeth pulled it off and stuck her hand inside the cannon.

Her fingers touched something cold, smooth, and metal. She pulled out a small disk of bronze the size of a tea saucer, etched with delicate letters and illustrations. She decided to examine it later. She thrust it in her pack and turned.

"Rushing off?" Reyna asked.

The praetor stood ten feet away, in full battle armor, holding a golden javelin. Her two metal greyhounds growled at her side.

Annabeth scanned the area. They were more or less alone. Most of the combat had moved toward the docks. Hopefully her friends had all made it on board, but they'd have to set sail immediately or risk being overrun. Annabeth had to hurry.

"Reyna," she said, "what happened at Camp Jupiter was Gaea's fault. Eidolons, possessing spirits—"

"Save your explanations," Reyna said. "You'll need

them for the trial.”

The dogs snarled and inched forward. This time, it didn't seem to matter to them that Annabeth was telling the truth. She tried to think of an escape plan. She doubted she could take Reyna in one-on-one combat. With those metal dogs, she stood no chance at all.

“If you let Gaea drive our camps apart,” Annabeth said, “the giants have already won. They'll destroy the Romans, the Greeks, the gods, the whole mortal world.”

“Don't you think I know that?” Reyna's voice was as hard as iron. “What choice have you left me? Octavian smells blood. He's whipped the legion into a frenzy, and I can't stop it. Surrender to me. I'll bring you back to New Rome for trial. It won't be fair. You'll be painfully executed. But it *may* be enough to stop further violence. Octavian won't be satisfied, of course, but I think I can convince the others to stand down.”

“It wasn't me!”

“It doesn't *matter*!” Reyna snapped. “Someone must pay for what happened. Let it be you. It's the better option.”

Annabeth's skin crawled. “Better than what?”

“Use that wisdom of yours,” Reyna said. “If you escape today, we won't follow. I told you—not even a madman would cross the sea to the ancient lands. If Octavian can't have vengeance on your ship, he'll turn

his attention to Camp Half-Blood. The legion will march on your territory. We will raze it and salt the earth.”

Kill the Romans, she heard her mother urging. *They can never be your allies.*

Annabeth wanted to sob. Camp Half-Blood was the only real home she’d ever known, and in a bid for friendship, she had told Reyna exactly where to find it. She couldn’t leave it at the mercy of the Romans and travel halfway around the world.

But their quest, and everything she’d suffered to get Percy back...if she didn’t go to the ancient lands, it would all mean nothing. Besides, the Mark of Athena didn’t have to lead to revenge.

If I could find the route, her mother had said, *the way home...*

How will you use your reward? Aphrodite had asked. *For war or peace?*

There *was* an answer. The Mark of Athena could lead her there—if she survived.

“I’m going,” she told Reyna. “I’m following the Mark of Athena to Rome.”

The praetor shook her head. “You have no idea what awaits you.”

“Yes, I do,” Annabeth said. “This grudge between our camps...I can fix it.”

“Our grudge is thousands of years old. How can

one person fix it?”

Annabeth wished she could give a convincing answer, show Reyna a 3-D diagram or a brilliant schematic, but she couldn't. She just knew she had to try. She remembered that lost look on her mother's face: *I must return home*.

“The quest has to succeed,” she said. “You can try to stop me, in which case we'll have to fight to the death. Or you can let me go, and I'll try to save both our camps. If you must march on Camp Half-Blood, at least try to delay. Slow Octavian down.”

Reyna's eyes narrowed. “One daughter of a war goddess to another, I respect your boldness. But if you leave now, you doom your camp to destruction.”

“Don't underestimate Camp Half-Blood,” Annabeth warned.

“You've never seen the legion at war,” Reyna countered.

Over by the docks, a familiar voice shrieked over the wind: “Kill them! Kill them all!”

Octavian had survived his swim in the harbor. He crouched behind his guards, screaming encouragement at the other Roman demigods as they struggled toward the ship, holding up their shields as if that would deflect the storm raging all around them.

On the deck of the *Argo II*, Percy and Jason stood together, their swords crossed. Annabeth got a tingle

down her spine as she realized the boys were working as one, summoning the sky and the sea to do their bidding. Water and wind churned together. Waves heaved against the ramparts and lightning flashed. Giant eagles were knocked out of the sky. Wreckage of the flying chariot burned in the water, and Coach Hedge swung a mounted crossbow, taking potshots at the Roman birds as they flew overhead.

“You see?” Reyna said bitterly. “The spear is thrown. Our people are at war.”

“Not if I succeed,” Annabeth said.

Reyna’s expression looked the same as it had at Camp Jupiter when she realized Jason had found another girl. The praetor was too alone, too bitter and betrayed to believe anything could go right for her ever again. Annabeth waited for her to attack.

Instead, Reyna flicked her hand. The metal dogs backed away. “Annabeth Chase,” she said, “when we meet again, we will be enemies on the field of battle.”

The praetor turned and walked across the ramparts, her greyhounds behind her.

Annabeth feared it might be some sort of trick, but she had no time to wonder. She ran for the ship.

The winds that battered the Romans didn’t seem to affect her.

Annabeth sprinted through their lines. Octavian yelled, “Stop her!”

A spear flew past her ear. The *Argo II* was already pulling away from the dock. Piper was at the gangplank, her hand outstretched.

Annabeth leaped and grabbed Piper's hand. The gangplank fell into the sea, and the two girls tumbled onto the deck.

"Go!" Annabeth screamed. "Go, go, go!"

The engines rumbled beneath her. The oars churned. Jason changed the course of the wind, and Percy called up a massive wave, which lifted the ship higher than the fort's walls and pushed it out to sea. By the time the *Argo II* reached top speed, Fort Sumter was only a blot in the distance, and they were racing across the waves toward the ancient lands.

X X I

LEO

AFTER RAIDING A MUSEUM FULL OF Confederate ghosts, Leo didn't think his day could get any worse. He was wrong.

They hadn't found anything in the Civil War sub or elsewhere in the museum; just a few elderly tourists, a dozing security guard, and—when they tried to inspect the artifacts—a whole battalion of glowing zombie dudes in gray uniforms.

The idea that Frank should be able to control the spirits? Yeah...that pretty much failed. By the time

Piper sent her Iris-message warning them about the Roman attack, they were already halfway back to the ship, having been chased through downtown Charleston by a pack of angry dead Confederates.

Then—oh, boy!—Leo got to hitch a ride with Frank the Friendly Eagle so they could fight a bunch of Romans. Rumor must've gotten around that Leo was the one who had fired on their little city, because those Romans seemed especially anxious to kill him.

But wait! There was more! Coach Hedge shot them out of the sky; Frank dropped him (that was no accident); and they crash-landed in Fort Sumter.

Now, as the *Argo II* raced across the waves, Leo had to use all his skill just to keep the ship in one piece. Percy and Jason were a little *too* good at cooking up massive storms.

At one point, Annabeth stood next to him, yelling against the roar of the wind: “Percy says he talked to a Nereid in Charleston Harbor!”

“Good for him!” Leo yelled back.

“The Nereid said we should seek help from Chiron’s brothers.”

“What does that mean? The Party Ponies?” Leo had never met Chiron’s crazy centaur relatives, but he’d heard rumors of Nerf sword-fights, root beer-chugging contests, and Super Soakers filled with pressurized whipped cream.

“Not sure,” Annabeth said. “But I’ve got coordinates. Can you input latitude and longitude in this thing?”

“I can input star charts and order you a smoothie, if you want. Of *course* I can do latitude and longitude!”

Annabeth rattled off the numbers. Leo somehow managed to punch them in while holding the wheel with one hand. A red dot popped up on the bronze display screen.

“That location is in the middle of the Atlantic,” he said. “Do the Party Ponies have a yacht?”

Annabeth shrugged helplessly. “Just hold the ship together until we get farther from Charleston. Jason and Percy will keep up the winds!”

“Happy fun time!”

It seemed like forever, but finally the sea calmed and the winds died.

“Valdez,” said Coach Hedge, with surprising gentleness. “Let me take the wheel. You’ve been steering for two hours.”

“Two hours?”

“Yeah. Give me the wheel.”

“Coach?”

“Yeah, kid?”

“I can’t unclench my hands.”

It was true. Leo’s fingers felt like they had turned to stone. His eyes burned from staring at the horizon. His

knees were marshmallows. Coach Hedge managed to pry him from the wheel.

Leo took one last look at the console, listening to Festus chatter and whirl a status report. Leo felt like he was forgetting something. He stared at the controls, trying to think, but it was no good. His eyes could hardly focus. “Just watch for monsters,” he told the coach. “And be careful with the damaged stabilizer. And—”

“I’ve got it covered,” Coach Hedge promised. “Now, go away!”

Leo nodded wearily. He staggered across the deck toward his friends.

Percy and Jason sat with their backs against the mast, their heads slumped in exhaustion. Annabeth and Piper were trying to get them to drink some water.

Hazel and Frank stood just out of earshot, having an argument that involved lots of arm waving and head shaking. Leo should not have felt pleased about that, but part of him did. The other part of him felt bad that he felt pleased.

The argument stopped abruptly when Hazel saw Leo. Everybody gathered at the mast.

Frank scowled like he was trying hard to turn into a bulldog. “No sign of pursuit,” he said.

“Or land,” Hazel added. She looked a little green, though Leo wasn’t sure if that was from the rocking of

the boat or from arguing.

Leo scanned the horizon. Nothing but ocean in every direction. That shouldn't have surprised him. He'd spent six months building a ship that he knew would cross the Atlantic. But until today, their embarking on a journey to the ancient lands hadn't seemed real. Leo had never been outside the U.S. before—except for a quick dragon flight up to Quebec. Now they were in the middle of the open sea, completely on their own, sailing to the Mare Nostrum, where all the scary monsters and nasty giants had come from. The Romans might not follow them, but they couldn't count on any help from Camp Half-Blood, either.

Leo patted his waist to make sure his tool belt was still there. Unfortunately that just reminded him of Nemesis's fortune cookie, tucked inside one of the pockets.

You will always be an outsider. The goddess's voice still wriggled around in his head. *The seventh wheel.*

Forget her, Leo told himself. Concentrate on the stuff you can fix.

He turned to Annabeth. "Did you find the map you wanted?"

She nodded, though she looked pale. Leo wondered what she'd seen at Fort Sumter that could have shaken

her up so badly.

"I'll have to study it," she said, as if that was the end of the subject. "How far are we from those coordinates?"

"At top rowing speed, about an hour," Leo said. "Any idea what we're looking for?"

"No," she admitted. "Percy?"

Percy raised his head. His green eyes were bloodshot and droopy. "The Nereid said Chiron's brothers were there, and they'd want to hear about that aquarium in Atlanta. I don't know what she meant, but..." He paused, like he'd used up all his energy saying that much. "She also warned me to be careful. Keto, the goddess at the aquarium: she's the mother of sea monsters. She might be stuck in Atlanta, but she can still send her children after us. The Nereid said we should expect an attack."

"Wonderful," Frank muttered.

Jason tried to stand, which wasn't a good idea. Piper grabbed him to keep him from falling over, and he slid back down the mast.

"Can we get the ship aloft?" he asked. "If we could fly—"

"That'd be great," Leo said. "Except Festus tells me the port aerial stabilizer got pulverized when the ship raked against the dock at Fort Sumter."

"We were in a hurry," Annabeth said. "Trying to

save you.”

“And saving me is a very noble cause,” Leo agreed. “I’m just saying, it’ll take some time to fix. Until then, we’re not flying anywhere.”

Percy flexed his shoulders and winced. “Fine with me. The sea is good.”

“Speak for yourself.” Hazel glanced at the evening sun, which was almost to the horizon. “We need to go fast. We’ve burned another day, and Nico only has three more left.”

“We can do it,” Leo promised. He hoped Hazel had forgiven him for not trusting her brother (hey, it had seemed like a reasonable suspicion to Leo), but he didn’t want to reopen that wound. “We can make it to Rome in three days—assuming, you know, nothing unexpected happens.”

Frank grunted. He looked like he was still working on that bulldog transformation. “Is there any *good* news?”

“Actually, yes,” Leo said. “According to Festus, our flying table, Buford, made it back safely while we were in Charleston, so those eagles didn’t get him. Unfortunately, he lost the laundry bag with your pants.”

“Dang it!” Frank barked, which Leo figured was probably severe profanity for him.

No doubt Frank would’ve cursed some more—busting out the *golly gees* and the *gosh darns*—but

Percy interrupted by doubling over and groaning.

“Did the world just turn upside down?” he asked.

Jason pressed his hands to his head. “Yeah, and it’s spinning. Everything is yellow. Is it supposed to be yellow?”

Annabeth and Piper exchanged concerned looks.

“Summoning that storm really sapped your strength,” Piper told the boys. “You’ve got to rest.”

Annabeth nodded agreement. “Frank, can you help us get the guys belowdecks?”

Frank glanced at Leo, no doubt reluctant to leave him alone with Hazel.

“It’s fine, man,” Leo said. “Just try not to drop them on the way down the stairs.”

Once the others were below, Hazel and Leo faced each other awkwardly. They were alone except for Coach Hedge, who was back on the quarterdeck singing the *Pokémon* theme song. The coach had changed the words to: *Gotta Kill ‘Em All*, and Leo really didn’t want to know why.

The song didn’t seem to help Hazel’s nausea.

“Ugh...” She leaned over and hugged her sides. She had nice hair—frizzy and golden brown like curls of cinnamon. Her hair reminded Leo of a place in Houston that made excellent *churros*. The thought made him hungry.

“Don’t lean over,” he advised. “Don’t close your

eyes. It makes the queasiness worse.”

“It does? Do you get seasick too?”

“Not seasick. But cars make me nauseous, and...”

He stopped himself. He wanted to say *talking to girls*, but he decided to keep that to himself.

“Cars?” Hazel straightened with difficulty. “You can sail a ship or fly a dragon, but cars make you sick?”

“I know, right?” Leo shrugged. “I’m special that way. Look, keep your eyes on the horizon. That’s a fixed point. It’ll help.”

Hazel took a deep breath and stared into the distance. Her eyes were lustrous gold, like the copper and bronze disks inside Festus’s mechanical head.

“Any better?” he asked.

“Maybe a little.” She sounded like she was just being polite. She kept her eyes on the horizon, but Leo got the feeling she was gauging his mood, considering what to say.

“Frank didn’t drop you on purpose,” she said. “He’s not like that. He’s just a little clumsy sometimes.”

“*Oops,*” Leo said, in his best Frank Zhang voice. “*Dropped Leo into a squad of enemy soldiers. Dang it!*”

Hazel tried to suppress a smile. Leo figured smiling was better than throwing up.

“Go easy on him,” Hazel said. “You and your

fireballs make Frank nervous.”

“The guy can turn into an elephant, and *I* make *him* nervous?”

Hazel kept her eyes on the horizon. She didn’t look quite so queasy, despite the fact that Coach Hedge was still singing his *Pokémon* song at the helm.

“Leo,” she said, “about what happened at the Great Salt Lake...”

Here it comes, Leo thought.

He remembered their meeting with the revenge goddess Nemesis. The fortune cookie in his tool belt started to feel heavier. Last night, as they flew from Atlanta, Leo had lain in his cabin and thought about how angry he’d made Hazel. He had thought about ways he could make it right.

Soon you will face a problem you cannot solve, Nemesis had said, *though I could help you...for a price.*

Leo had taken the fortune cookie out of his tool belt and turned it in his fingers, wondering what price he would have to pay if he broke it open.

Maybe now was the moment.

“I’d be willing,” he told Hazel. “I could use the fortune cookie to find your brother.”

Hazel looked stunned. “What? No! I mean...I’d never ask you to do that. Not after what Nemesis said about the horrible cost. We barely *know* each other!”

The *barely know each other* comment kind of hurt,

though Leo knew it was true.

“So...that’s not what you wanted to talk about?” he asked. “Uh, did you want to talk about the holding-hands-on-the-boulder moment? Because—”

“No!” she said quickly, fanning her face in that cute way she did when she was flustered. “No, I was just thinking about the way you tricked Narcissus and those nymphs...”

“Oh, right.” Leo glanced self-consciously at his arm. The HOT STUFF tattoo hadn’t completely faded. “Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“You were amazing,” Hazel said. “I’ve been mulling it over, how much you reminded me of—”

“Sammy,” Leo guessed. “I wish you’d tell me who he is.”

“Who he *was*,” Hazel corrected. The evening air was warm, but she shivered. “I’ve been thinking...I might be able to show you.”

“You mean like a photo?”

“No. There’s a sort of flashback that happens to me. I haven’t had one in a long time, and I’ve never tried to make one happen on purpose. But I shared one with Frank once, so I thought...”

Hazel locked eyes with him. Leo started to feel jittery, like he’d been injected with coffee. If this flashback was something Frank had shared with Hazel...well, either Leo didn’t want any part of it, or he

definitely wanted to try it. He wasn't sure which.

"When you say flashback..." He swallowed. "What exactly are we talking about? Is it safe?"

Hazel held out her hand. "I wouldn't ask you to do this, but I'm sure it's important. It *can't* be a coincidence we met. If this works, maybe we can finally understand how we're connected."

Leo glanced back at the helm. He still had a nagging suspicion he'd forgotten something, but Coach Hedge seemed to be doing fine. The sky ahead was clear. There was no sign of trouble.

Besides, a flashback sounded like a pretty brief thing. It couldn't hurt to let the coach be in charge for a few more minutes, could it?

"Okay," he relented. "Show me."

He took Hazel's hand, and the world dissolved.

X X I I

LEO

THEY STOOD IN THE COURTYARD of an old compound, like a monastery. Red brick walls were overgrown with vines. Big magnolia trees had cracked the pavement. The sun beat down, and the humidity was about two hundred percent, even stickier than in Houston. Somewhere nearby, Leo smelled fish frying. Overhead, the cloud cover was low and gray, striped like a tiger's pelt.

The courtyard was about the size of a basketball court. An old deflated football sat in one corner, at the base of a Virgin Mary statue.

Along the sides of the buildings, windows were open. Leo could see flickers of movement inside, but it was eerily quiet. He saw no sign of air conditioning, which meant it must have been a thousand degrees in there.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“My old school,” Hazel said next to him. “St. Agnes Academy for Colored Children and Indians.”

“What kind of name—?”

He turned toward Hazel and yelped. She was a ghost—just a vaporous silhouette in the steamy air. Leo looked down and realized his own body had turned to mist too.

Everything around him seemed solid and real, but he was a spirit. After having been possessed by an eidolon three days ago, he didn’t appreciate the feeling.

Before he could ask questions, a bell rang inside: not a modern electronic sound, but the old-fashioned buzz of a hammer on metal.

“This is a memory,” Hazel said, “so no one will see us. Look, here we come.”

“*We?*”

From every door, dozens of children spilled into the courtyard, yelling and jostling each other. They were mostly African American, with a sprinkling of Hispanic-looking kids, as young as kindergartners and as old as high schoolers. Leo could tell this was in the

past, because all the girls wore dresses and buckled leather shoes. The boys wore white collared shirts and pants held up by suspenders. Many wore caps like horse jockeys wear. Some kids carried lunches. Many didn't. Their clothes were clean, but worn and faded. Some had holes in the knees of their trousers, or shoes with the heels coming apart.

A few of the girls began playing jump rope with an old piece of clothesline. The older guys tossed a ratty baseball back and forth. Kids with lunches sat together and ate and chatted.

No one paid Ghost Hazel or Leo any attention.

Then Hazel—Hazel from the *past*—stepped into the courtyard. Leo recognized her with no problem, though she looked about two years younger than now. Her hair was pinned back in a bun. Her gold eyes darted around the courtyard uneasily. She wore a dark dress, unlike the other girls in their white cotton or pastel flowery prints, so she stood out like a mourner at a wedding.

She gripped a canvas lunch bag and moved along the wall, as if trying hard not to be noticed.

It didn't work. A boy called out, "Witch girl!" He lumbered toward her, backing her into a corner. The boy could have been fourteen or nineteen. It was hard to tell because he was so big and tall, easily the largest guy on the playground. Leo figured he'd been held

back a few times. He wore a dirty shirt the color of grease rags, threadbare wool trousers (in this heat, they couldn't have been comfortable), and no shoes at all. Maybe the teachers were too terrified to insist that this kid wear shoes, or maybe he just didn't have any.

"That's Rufus," said Ghost Hazel with distaste.

"Seriously? No way his name is Rufus," Leo said.

"Come on," said Ghost Hazel. She drifted toward the confrontation. Leo followed. He wasn't used to drifting, but he'd ridden a Segway once and it was kind of like that. He simply leaned in the direction he wanted to go and glided along.

The big kid Rufus had flat features, as if he spent most of his time face-planting on the sidewalk. His hair was cut just as flat on top, so miniature airplanes could've used it for a landing strip.

Rufus thrust out his hand. "Lunch."

Hazel from the past didn't protest. She handed over her canvas bag like this was an everyday occurrence.

A few older girls drifted over to watch the fun. One giggled at Rufus. "You don't want to eat that," she warned. "It's probably poison."

"You're right," Rufus said. "Did your witch mom make this, Levesque?"

"She's not a witch," Hazel muttered.

Rufus dropped the bag and stepped on it, smashing the contents under his bare heel. "You can have it back.

I want a diamond, though. I hear your momma can make those out of thin air. Gimme a diamond.”

“I don’t have diamonds,” Hazel said. “Go away.”

Rufus balled his fists. Leo had been in enough rough schools and foster homes to sense when things were about to turn ugly. He wanted to step in and help Hazel, but he was a ghost. Besides, all this had happened decades ago.

Then another kid stumbled outside into the sunlight.

Leo sucked in his breath. The boy looked exactly like him.

“You see?” asked Ghost Hazel.

Fake Leo was the same height as Regular Leo—meaning he was short. He had the same nervous energy—tapping his fingers against his trousers, brushing at his white cotton shirt, adjusting the jockey cap on his curly brown hair. (Really, Leo thought, short people should not wear jockey caps unless they were jockeys.) Fake Leo had the same devilish smile that greeted Regular Leo whenever he looked in a mirror—an expression that made teachers immediately shout, “Don’t even think about it!” and plop him in the front row.

Apparently, Fake Leo had just been scolded by a teacher. He was holding a dunce cap—an honest-to-goodness cardboard cone that said DUNCE. Leo thought

those were something you only saw in cartoons.

He could understand why Fake Leo wasn't wearing it. Bad enough to look like a jockey. With that cone on his head, he would've looked like a gnome.

Some kids backed up when Fake Leo burst onto the scene. Others nudged each other and ran toward him like they were expecting a show.

Meanwhile, Flathead Rufus was still trying to punk Hazel out of a diamond, oblivious to Fake Leo's arrival.

"Come on, girl." Rufus loomed over Hazel with his fists clenched. "Give it!"

Hazel pressed herself against the wall. Suddenly the ground at her feet went *snap*, like a twig breaking. A perfect diamond the size of a pistachio glittered between her feet.

"Ha!" Rufus barked when he saw it. He started to lean down, but Hazel yelped, "No, please!" as if she was genuinely concerned for the big goon.

That's when Fake Leo strolled over.

Here it comes, Leo thought. Fake Leo is gonna bust out some Coach Hedge-style jujitsu and save the day.

Instead, Fake Leo put the top of the dunce cap to his mouth like a megaphone and yelled, "CUT!"

He said it with such authority all the other kids momentarily froze. Even Rufus straightened and backed away in confusion.

One of the little boys snickered under his breath: “Hammy Sammy.”

Sammy... Leo shivered. *Who the heck was this kid?*

Sammy/Fake Leo stormed up to Rufus with his dunce cap in his hand, looking angry. “No, no, no!” he announced, waving his free hand wildly at the other kids, who were gathering to watch the entertainment.

Sammy turned to Hazel. “Miss Lamarr, your line is...” Sammy looked around in exasperation. “Script! What is Hedy Lamarr’s line?”

“*No, please, you villain!*” one of the boys called out.

“Thank you!” Sammy said. “Miss Lamarr, you’re supposed to say, *No, please, you villain!* And you, Clark Gable—”

The whole courtyard burst into laughter. Leo vaguely knew Clark Gable was an old-timey actor, but he didn’t know much else. Apparently, though, the idea that Flathead Rufus could be Clark Gable was hilarious to the kids.

“Mr. Gable—”

“No!” one of the girls cried. “Make him Gary Cooper.”

More laughter. Rufus looked as if he were about to blow a valve. He balled his fists like he wanted to hit somebody, but he couldn’t attack the entire school. He clearly hated being laughed at, but his slow little mind

couldn't quite work out what Sammy was up to.

Leo nodded in appreciation. Sammy *was* like him. Leo had done the same kind of stuff to bullies for years.

"Right!" Sammy yelled imperiously. "Mr. Cooper, you say, *Oh, but the diamond is mine, my treacherous darling!* And then you scoop up the diamond like this!"

"Sammy, no!" Hazel protested, but Sammy snatched up the stone and slipped it into his pocket in one smooth move.

He wheeled on Rufus. "I want emotion! I want the ladies in the audience swooning! Ladies, did Mr. Cooper make you swoon just now?"

"No," several of them called back.

"There, you see?" Sammy cried. "Now, from the top!" he yelled into his dunce cap. "Action!"

Rufus was just starting to get over his confusion. He stepped toward Sammy and said, "Valdez, I'm gonna—"

The bell rang. Kids swarmed the doors. Sammy pulled Hazel out of the way as the little ones—who acted like they were on Sammy's payroll—herded Rufus along with them so he was carried inside on a tide of kindergartners.

Soon Sammy and Hazel were alone except for the ghosts.

Sammy scooped up Hazel's smashed lunch, made a show of dusting off the canvas bag, and presented it to

her with a deep bow, as if it were her crown. “Miss Lamarr.”

Hazel from the past took her ruined lunch. She looked like she was about to cry, but Leo couldn’t tell if that was from relief or misery or admiration. “Sammy... Rufus is going to kill you.”

“Ah, he knows better than to tangle with me.” Sammy plopped the dunce cap on top of his jockey cap. He stood up straight and stuck out his scrawny chest. The dunce cap fell off.

Hazel laughed. “You are ridiculous.”

“Why, thank you, Miss Lamarr.”

“You’re welcome, *my treacherous darling*.”

Sammy’s smile wavered. The air became uncomfortably charged. Hazel stared at the ground. “You shouldn’t have touched that diamond. It’s dangerous.”

“Ah, come on,” Sammy said. “Not for me!”

Hazel studied him warily, like she wanted to believe it. “Bad things might happen. You shouldn’t—”

“I won’t sell it,” Sammy said. “I promise! I’ll just keep it as a token of your flavor.”

Hazel forced a smile. “I think you mean *token of my favor*.”

“There you are! We should get going. It’s time for our next scene: *Hedy Lamarr nearly dies of boredom in English class*.”

Sammy held out his elbow like a gentleman, but Hazel pushed him away playfully. “Thanks for being there, Sammy.”

“Miss Lamarr, I will *always* be there for you!” he said brightly. The two of them raced back into the schoolhouse.

Leo felt more like a ghost than ever. Maybe he had actually been an eidolon his whole life, because this kid he’d just seen should have been the *real* Leo. He was smarter, cooler, and funnier. He flirted so well with Hazel that he had obviously stolen her heart.

No wonder Hazel had looked at Leo so strangely when they first met. No wonder she had said *Sammy* with so much feeling. But Leo wasn’t Sammy, any more than Flathead Rufus was Clark Gable.

“Hazel,” he said. “I—I don’t—”

The schoolyard dissolved into a different scene.

Hazel and Leo were still ghosts, but now they stood in front of a rundown house next to a drainage ditch overgrown with weeds. A clump of banana trees drooped in the yard. Perched on the steps, an old-fashioned radio played *conjunto* music, and on the shaded porch, sitting in a rocking chair, a skinny old man gazed at the horizon.

“Where *are* we?” Hazel asked. She was still only vapor, but her voice was full of alarm. “This isn’t from my life!”

Leo felt as if his ghostly self was thickening, becoming more real. This place seemed strangely familiar.

“It’s Houston,” he realized. “I know this view. That drainage ditch... This is my mom’s old neighborhood, where she grew up. Hobby Airport is over that way.”

“This is *your* life?” Hazel said. “I don’t understand! How—?”

“You’re asking me?” Leo demanded.

Suddenly the old man murmured, “Ah, Hazel...”

A shock went up Leo’s spine. The old man’s eyes were still fixed on the horizon. How did he know they were here?

“I guess we ran out of time,” the old man continued dreamily. “Well...”

He didn’t finish the thought.

Hazel and Leo stayed very still. The old man made no further sign that he saw them or heard them. It dawned on Leo that the guy had been talking to himself. But then why had he said Hazel’s name?

He had leathery skin, curly white hair, and gnarled hands, like he’d spent a lifetime working in a machine shop. He wore a pale yellow shirt, spotless and clean, with gray slacks and suspenders and polished black shoes.

Despite his age, his eyes were sharp and clear. He sat with a kind of quiet dignity. He looked at peace—

amused, even, like he was thinking, *Dang, I lived this long? Cool!*

Leo was pretty sure he had never seen this man before. So why did he seem familiar? Then he realized the man was tapping his fingers on the arm of his chair, but the tapping wasn't random. He was using Morse code, just like Leo's mother used to do with him...and the old man was tapping the same message: *I love you.*

The screen door opened. A young woman came out. She wore jeans and a turquoise blouse. Her hair was cut in a short black wedge. She was pretty, but not delicate. She had well-muscled arms and calloused hands. Like the old man's, her brown eyes glinted with amusement. In her arms was a baby, wrapped in a blue blanket.

"Look, *mijo*," she said to the baby. "This is your *bisabuelo*. *Bisabuelo*, you want to hold him?"

When Leo heard her voice, he sobbed.

It was his mother—younger than he remembered her, but very much alive. That meant the baby in her arms...

The old man broke into a huge grin. He had perfect teeth, as white as his hair. His face crinkled with smile lines. "A boy! *Mi bebito*, Leo!"

"Leo?" Hazel whispered. "That—that's you? What is *bisabuelo*?"

Leo couldn't find his voice. *Great-grandfather*, he

wanted to say.

The old man took baby Leo in his arms, chuckling with appreciation and tickling the baby's chin—and Ghost Leo finally realized what he was seeing.

Somehow, Hazel's power to revisit the past had found the one event that connected both of their lives—where Leo's time line touched Hazel's.

This old man...

"Oh..." Hazel seemed to realize who he was at the same moment. Her voice became very small, on the verge of tears. "Oh, Sammy, no..."

"Ah, little Leo," said Sammy Valdez, aged well into his seventies. "You'll have to be my stunt double, eh? That's what they call it, I think. Tell her for me. I hoped I would be alive, but, *ay*, the curse won't have it!"

Hazel sobbed. "Gaea... Gaea told me that he died of a heart attack, in the 1960s. But this isn't—this can't be..."

Sammy Valdez kept talking to the baby, while Leo's mother, Esperanza, looked on with a pained smile—perhaps a little worried that Leo's *bisabuelo* was rambling, a little sad that he was speaking nonsense.

"That lady, Doña Callida, she warned me." Sammy shook his head sadly. "She said Hazel's great danger would not happen in my lifetime. But I promised I

would be there for her. You will have to tell her I'm sorry, Leo. Help her if you can."

"*Bisabeulo*," Esperanza said, "you must be tired."

She extended her arms to take the baby, but the old man cuddled him a moment longer. Baby Leo seemed perfectly fine with it.

"Tell her I'm sorry I sold the diamond, eh?" Sammy said. "I broke my promise. When she disappeared in Alaska... ah, so long ago, I finally used that diamond, moved to Texas as I always dreamed. I started my machine shop. Started my family! It was a good life, but Hazel was right. The diamond came with a curse. I never saw her again."

"Oh, Sammy," Hazel said. "No, a curse didn't keep me away. I *wanted* to come back. I died!"

The old man didn't seem to hear. He smiled down at the baby, and kissed him on the head. "I give you my blessing, Leo. First male great-grandchild! I have a feeling you are special, like Hazel was. You are more than a regular baby, eh? You will carry on for me. You will see her someday. Tell her hello for me."

"*Bisabuelo*," Esperanza said, a little more insistently.

"Yes, yes." Sammy chuckled. "*El viejo loco* rambles on. I am tired, Esperanza. You are right. But I'll rest soon. It's been a good life. Raise him well, *nieta*."

The scene faded.

Leo was standing on the deck of the *Argo II*, holding Hazel's hand. The sun had gone down, and the ship was lit only by bronze lanterns. Hazel's eyes were puffy from crying.

What they'd seen was too much. The whole ocean heaved under them, and now for the first time Leo felt as if they were totally adrift.

"Hello, Hazel Levesque," he said, his voice gravelly.

Her chin trembled. She turned away and opened her mouth to speak, but before she could, the ship lurched to one side.

"Leo!" Coach Hedge yelled.

Festus whirred in alarm and blew flames into the night sky. The ship's bell rang.

"Those monsters you were worried about?" Hedge shouted. "One of 'em found us!"

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LEO

LEO DESERVED A DUNCE CAP.

If he'd been thinking straight, he would've switched the ship's detection system from radar to sonar as soon as they left Charleston Harbor. *That's* what he had forgotten. He'd designed the hull to resonate every few seconds, sending waves through the Mist and alerting Festus to any nearby monsters, but it only worked in one mode at a time: water or air.

He'd been so rattled by the Romans, then the storm, then Hazel, that he had completely forgotten. Now, a

monster was right underneath them.

The ship tilted to starboard. Hazel gripped the rigging. Hedge yelled, “Valdez, which button blows up monsters? Take the helm!”

Leo climbed the tilting deck and managed to grab the port rail. He started clambering sideways toward the helm, but when he saw the monster surface, he forgot how to move.

The thing was the length of their ship. In the moonlight, it looked like a cross between a giant shrimp and a cockroach, with a pink chitinous shell, a flat crayfish tail, and millipede-type legs undulating hypnotically as the monster scraped against the hull of the *Argo II*.

Its head surfaced last—the slimy pink face of an enormous catfish with glassy dead eyes, a gaping toothless maw, and a forest of tentacles sprouting from each nostril, making the bushiest nose beard Leo had ever had the displeasure to behold.

Leo remembered special Friday night dinners he and his mom used to share at a local seafood restaurant in Houston. They would eat shrimp and catfish. The idea now made him want to throw up.

“Come on, Valdez!” Hedge yelled. “Take the wheel so I can get my baseball bat!”

“A bat’s not going to help,” Leo said, but he made his way toward the helm.

Behind him, the rest of his friends stumbled up the stairs.

Percy yelled, “What’s going— Gah! Shrimpzilla!”

Frank ran to Hazel’s side. She was clutching the rigging, still dazed from her flashback, but she gestured that she was all right.

The monster rammed the ship again. The hull groaned. Annabeth, Piper, and Jason tumbled to starboard and almost rolled overboard.

Leo reached the helm. His hands flew across the controls. Over the intercom, Festus clacked and clicked about leaks belowdecks, but the ship didn’t seem to be in danger of sinking—at least not yet.

Leo toggled the oars. They could convert into spears, which should be enough to drive the creature away. Unfortunately, they were jammed. Shrimpzilla must have knocked them out of alignment, and the monster was in spitting distance, which meant that Leo couldn’t use the ballistae without setting the *Argo II* on fire as well.

“How did it get so close?” Annabeth shouted, pulling herself up on one of the rail shields.

“I don’t know!” Hedge snarled. He looked around for his bat, which had rolled across the quarterdeck.

“I’m stupid!” Leo scolded himself. “Stupid, stupid! I forgot the sonar!”

The ship tilted farther to starboard. Either the

monster was trying to give them a hug, or it was about to capsize them.

“Sonar?” Hedge demanded. “Pan’s pipes, Valdez! Maybe if you hadn’t been staring into Hazel’s eyes, holding hands for so long—”

“*What?*” Frank yelped.

“It wasn’t like that!” Hazel protested.

“It doesn’t matter!” Piper said. “Jason, can you call some lightning?”

Jason struggled to his feet. “I—” He only managed to shake his head. Summoning the storm earlier had taken too much out of him. Leo doubted the poor guy could pop a spark plug in the shape he was in.

“Percy!” Annabeth said. “Can you *talk* to that thing? Do you know what it is?”

The son of the sea god shook his head, clearly mystified. “Maybe it’s just curious about the ship. Maybe—”

The monster’s tendrils lashed across the deck so fast, Leo didn’t even have time to yell, *Look out!*

One slammed Percy in the chest and sent him crashing down the steps. Another wrapped around Piper’s legs and dragged her, screaming, toward the rail. Dozens more tendrils curled around the masts, encircling the crossbows and ripping down the rigging.

“Nose-hair attack!” Hedge snatched up his bat and leaped into action; but his hits just bounced harmlessly

off the tendrils.

Jason drew his sword. He tried to free Piper, but he was still weak. His gold blade cut through the tendrils with no problem, but faster than he could sever them, more took their place.

Annabeth unsheathed her dagger. She ran through the forest of tentacles, dodging and stabbing at whatever target she could find. Frank pulled out his bow. He fired over the side at the creature's body, lodging arrows in the chinks of its shell; but that only seemed to annoy the monster. It bellowed, and rocked the ship. The mast creaked like it might snap off.

They needed more firepower, but they couldn't use ballistae. They needed to deliver a blast that wouldn't destroy the ship. But how... ?

Leo's eyes fixed on a supply crate next to Hazel's feet.

"Hazel!" he yelled. "That box! Open it!"

She hesitated, then saw the box he meant. The label read WARNING. DO NOT OPEN.

"Open it!" Leo yelled again. "Coach, take the wheel! Turn us toward the monster, or we'll capsize."

Hedge danced through the tentacles with his nimble goat hooves, smashing away with gusto. He bounded toward the helm and took the controls.

"Hope you got a plan!" he shouted.

"A bad one." Leo raced toward the mast.

The monster pushed against the *Argo II*. The deck lurched to forty-five degrees. Despite everyone's efforts, the tentacles were just too numerous to fight. They seemed able to elongate as much as they wanted. Soon they'd have the *Argo II* completely entangled. Percy hadn't appeared from below. The others were fighting for their lives against nose hair.

"Frank!" Leo called as he ran toward Hazel. "Buy us some time! Can you turn into a shark or something?"

Frank glanced over, scowling; and in that moment a tentacle slammed into the big guy, knocking him overboard.

Hazel screamed. She'd opened the supply box and almost dropped the two glass vials she was holding.

Leo caught them. Each was the size of an apple, and the liquid inside glowed poisonous green. The glass was warm to the touch. Leo's chest felt like it might implode from guilt. He'd just distracted Frank and possibly gotten him killed, but he couldn't think about it. He had to save the ship.

"Come on!" He handed Hazel one of the vials. "We can kill the monster—and save Frank!"

He hoped he wasn't lying. Getting to the port rail was more like rock climbing than walking, but finally they made it.

"What is this stuff?" Hazel gasped, cradling her glass vial.

“Greek fire!”

Her eyes widened. “Are you *crazy*? If these break, we’ll burn the whole ship!”

“Its mouth!” Leo said. “Just chuck it down its—”

Suddenly Leo was crushed against Hazel, and the world turned sideways. As they were lifted into the air, he realized they’d been wrapped together in a tentacle. Leo’s arms were free, but it was all he could do to keep hold of his Greek fire vial. Hazel struggled. Her arms were pinned, which meant at any moment the vial trapped between them might break...and that would be extremely bad for their health.

They rose ten feet, twenty feet, thirty feet above the monster. Leo caught a glimpse of his friends in a losing battle, yelling and slashing at the monster’s nose hairs. He saw Coach Hedge struggling to keep the ship from capsizing. The sea was dark, but in the moonlight he thought he saw a glistening object floating near the monster—maybe the unconscious body of Frank Zhang.

“Leo,” Hazel gasped, “I can’t—my arms—”

“Hazel,” he said. “Do you trust me?”

“No!”

“Me neither,” Leo admitted. “When this thing drops us, hold your breath. Whatever you do, try to chuck your vial as far *away* from the ship as possible.”

“Why—why would it drop us?”

Leo stared down at the monster's head. This would be a tough shot, but he had no choice. He raised the vial in his left hand. He pressed his right hand against the tentacle and summoned fire to his palm—a narrowly focused, white-hot burst.

That got the creature's attention. A tremble went all the way down the tentacle as its flesh blistered under Leo's touch. The monster raised its maw, bellowing in pain, and Leo threw his Greek fire straight down its throat.

After that, things got fuzzy. Leo felt the tentacle release them. They fell. He heard a muffled explosion and saw a green flash of light inside the giant pink lampshade of the monster's body. The water hit Leo's face like a brick wrapped in sandpaper, and he sank into darkness. He clamped his mouth shut, trying not to breathe, but he could feel himself losing consciousness.

Through the sting of the salt water, he thought he saw the hazy silhouette of the ship's hull above—a dark oval surrounded by a green fiery corona, but he couldn't tell if the ship was actually on fire.

Killed by a giant shrimp, Leo thought bitterly. *At least let the Argo II survive. Let my friends be okay.*

His vision began to dim. His lungs burned.

Just as he was about to give up, a strange face hovered over him—a man who looked like Chiron, their trainer back at Camp Half-Blood. He had the same

curly hair, shaggy beard, and intelligent eyes—a look somewhere between wild hippie and fatherly professor, except this man’s skin was the color of a lima bean. The man silently held up a dagger. His expression was grim and reproachful, as if to say: *Now, hold still, or I can’t kill you properly.*

Leo blacked out.

When Leo woke, he wondered if he was a ghost in another flashback, because he was floating weightlessly. His eyes slowly adjusted to the dim light.

“About time.” Frank’s voice had too much reverb, like he was speaking through several layers of plastic wrap.

Leo sat up...or rather he drifted upright. He was underwater, in a cave about the size of a two-car garage. Phosphorescent moss covered the ceiling, bathing the room in a blue-and-green glow. The floor was a carpet of sea urchins, which would have been uncomfortable to walk on, so Leo was glad he was floating. He didn’t understand how he could be breathing with no air.

Frank levitated nearby in meditation position. With his chubby face and his grumpy expression, he looked like a Buddha who’d achieved enlightenment and wasn’t thrilled about it.

The only exit to the cave was blocked by a massive

abalone shell—its surface glistening in pearl and rose and turquoise. If this cave was a prison, at least it had an awesome door.

“Where are we?” Leo asked. “Where is everyone else?”

“*Everyone?*” Frank grumbled. “I don’t know. As far as I can tell, it’s just you and me and Hazel down here. The fish-horse guys took Hazel about an hour ago, leaving me with you.”

Frank’s tone made it obvious he didn’t approve of those arrangements. He didn’t look injured, but Leo realized that he no longer had his bow or quiver. In a panic, Leo patted his waist. His tool belt was gone.

“They searched us,” Frank said. “Took anything that could be a weapon.”

“Who?” Leo demanded. “Who are these fish-horse —?”

“Fish-horse guys,” Frank clarified, which wasn’t very clear. “They must have grabbed us when we fell in the ocean and dragged us... wherever this is.”

Leo remembered the last thing he’d seen before he passed out—the lima-bean-colored face of the bearded man with the dagger. “The shrimp monster. The *Argo II*—is the ship okay?”

“I don’t know,” Frank said darkly. “The others might be in trouble or hurt, or—or worse. But I guess you care more about your ship than your friends.”

Leo felt like his face had just hit the water again. “What kind of stupid thing—?”

Then he realized why Frank was so angry: the flashback. Things had happened so fast with the monster attack, Leo had almost forgotten. Coach Hedge had made that stupid comment about Leo and Hazel holding hands and gazing into each other’s eyes. It probably hadn’t helped that Leo had gotten Frank knocked overboard right after that.

Suddenly Leo found it hard to meet Frank’s gaze.

“Look, man...I’m sorry I got us into this mess. I totally jacked things up.” He took a deep breath, which felt surprisingly normal, considering he was underwater. “Me and Hazel holding hands...it’s not what you think. She was showing me this flashback from her past, trying to figure out my connection with Sammy.”

Frank’s angry expression started to unknot, replaced by curiosity. “Did she...did you figure it out?”

“Yeah,” Leo said. “Well, sort of. We didn’t get a chance to talk about it afterward because of Shrimpzilla, but Sammy was my great-grandfather.”

He told Frank what they’d seen. The weirdness hadn’t fully registered yet, but now, trying to explain it aloud, Leo could hardly believe it. Hazel had been sweet on his *bisabuelo*, a guy who had died when Leo was a baby. Leo hadn’t made the connection before, but

he had a vague memory of older family members calling his grandfather Sam Junior. Which meant Sam Senior was Sammy, Leo's *bisabuelo*. At some point, Tía Callida—Hera herself—had talked with Sammy, consoling him and giving him a glimpse into the future, which meant that Hera had been shaping Leo's life generations before he was even born. If Hazel had stayed in the 1940s, if she'd married Sammy, Leo might've been her great-grandson.

"Oh, man," Leo said when he had finished the story. "I don't feel so good. But I swear on the Styx, that's what we saw."

Frank had the same expression as the monster catfish head—wide glassy eyes and an open mouth. "Hazel... Hazel liked your *great-grandfather*? That's why she likes you?"

"Frank, I know this is weird. *Believe* me. But I don't like Hazel—not *that* way. I'm not moving in on your girl."

Frank knit his eyebrows. "No?"

Leo hoped he wasn't blushing. Truthfully, he had no idea how he felt about Hazel. She was awesome and cute, and Leo had a weakness for awesome cute girls. But the flashback had complicated his feelings *a lot*.

Besides, his ship was in trouble.

I guess you care more about your ship than your friends, Frank had said.

That wasn't true, was it? Leo's dad, Hephaestus, had admitted once that he wasn't good with organic life forms. And, yes, Leo had always been more comfortable with machines than people. But he *did* care about his friends. Piper and Jason...he'd known them the longest, but the others were important to him too. Even Frank. They were like family.

The problem was, it had been so long since Leo had *had* a family, he couldn't even remember how it felt. Sure, last winter he'd become senior counselor of Hephaestus cabin; but most of his time had been spent building the ship. He liked his cabin mates. He knew how to work with them—but did he really know them?

If Leo had a family, it was the demigods on the *Argo II*—and maybe Coach Hedge, which Leo would never admit aloud.

You will always be the outsider, warned Nemesis's voice; but Leo tried to push that thought aside.

"Right, so..." He looked around him. "We need to make a plan. How are we breathing? If we're under the ocean, shouldn't we be crushed by the water pressure?"

Frank shrugged. "Fish-horse magic, I guess. I remember the green guy touching my head with the point of a dagger. Then I could breathe."

Leo studied the abalone door. "Can you bust us out? Turn into a hammerhead shark or something?"

Frank shook his head glumly. "My shape-shifting

doesn't work. I don't know why. Maybe they cursed me, or maybe I'm too messed up to focus."

"Hazel could be in trouble," Leo said. "We've got to get out of here."

He swam to the door and ran his fingers along the abalone. He couldn't feel any kind of latch or other mechanism. Either the door could only be opened by magic or sheer force was required—neither of which was Leo's specialty.

"I've already tried," Frank said. "Even if we get out, we have no weapons."

"Hmm..." Leo held up his hand. "I wonder."

He concentrated, and fire flickered over his fingers. For a split second, Leo was excited, because he hadn't expected it to work underwater. Then his plan started working a little too well. Fire raced up his arm and over his body until he was completely shrouded in a thin veil of flame. He tried to breathe, but he was inhaling pure heat.

"Leo!" Frank flailed backward like he was falling off a bar stool. Instead of racing to Leo's aid, he hugged the wall to get as far away as possible.

Leo forced himself to stay calm. He understood what was going on. The fire itself couldn't hurt him. He willed the flames to die and counted to five. He took a shallow breath. He had oxygen again.

Frank stopped trying to merge with the cave wall.

“You’re...you’re okay?”

“Yeah,” Leo grumbled. “Thanks for the assist.”

“I—I’m sorry.” Frank looked so horrified and ashamed it was hard for Leo to stay mad at him. “I just...what happened?”

“Clever magic,” Leo said. “There’s a thin layer of oxygen around us, like an extra skin. Must be self-regenerating. That’s how we’re breathing and staying dry. The oxygen gave the fire fuel—except the fire also suffocated me.”

“I really don’t...” Frank gulped. “I don’t like that fire summoning you do.” He started getting cozy with the wall again.

Leo didn’t mean to, but he couldn’t help laughing. “Man, I’m not going to attack you.”

“Fire,” Frank repeated, like that one word explained everything.

Leo remembered what Hazel had said—that his fire made Frank nervous. He’d seen the discomfort in Frank’s face before, but Leo hadn’t taken it seriously. Frank seemed *way* more powerful and scary than Leo was.

Now it occurred to him that Frank might have had a bad experience with fire. Leo’s own mom had died in a machine shop blaze. Leo had been blamed for it. He’d grown up being called a freak, an arsonist, because whenever he got angry, things burned.

“Sorry I laughed,” he said, and he meant it. “My mom died in a fire. I understand being afraid of it. Did, uh...did something like that happen with you?”

Frank seemed to be weighing how much to say. “My house...my grandmother’s place. It burned down. But it’s more than that...” He stared at the sea urchins on the floor. “Annabeth said I could trust the crew. Even you.”

“Even me, huh?” Leo wondered how *that* had come up in conversation. “Wow, high praise.”

“My weakness...” Frank started, like the words cut his mouth. “There’s this piece of firewood—”

The abalone door rolled open.

Leo turned and found himself face-to-face with Lima Bean Man, who wasn’t actually a man at all. Now that Leo could see him clearly, the guy was by far the weirdest creature he’d ever met, and that was saying a lot.

From the waist up, he was more or less human—a thin, bare-chested dude with a dagger in his belt and a band of seashells strapped across his chest like a bandolier. His skin was green, his beard scraggly brown, and his longish hair was tied back in a seaweed bandana. A pair of lobster claws stuck up from his head like horns, turning and snapping at random.

Leo decided he didn’t look so much like Chiron. He looked more like the poster Leo’s mom used to keep in

her workspace—that old Mexican bandit Pancho Villa, except with seashells and lobster horns.

From the waist down, the guy was more complicated. He had the forelegs of a blue-green horse, sort of like a centaur, but toward the back, his horse body morphed into a long fishy tail about ten feet long, with a rainbow-colored, V-shaped tail fin.

Now Leo understood what Frank meant about fish-horse guys.

“I am Bythos,” said the green man. “I will interrogate Frank Zhang.”

His voice was calm and firm, leaving no room for debate.

“Why did you capture us?” Leo demanded. “Where’s Hazel?”

Bythos narrowed his eyes. His expression seemed to say: *Did this tiny creature just talk to me?* “You, Leo Valdez, will go with my brother.”

“Your brother?”

Leo realized that a much larger figure was looming behind Bythos, with a shadow so wide, it filled the entire cave entrance.

“Yes,” Bythos said with a dry smile. “Try not to make Aphros mad.”

XXIV

LEO

APHROS LOOKED LIKE HIS BROTHER, except he was blue instead of green and much, much bigger. He had Arnold-as-Terminator abs and arms, and a square, brutish head. A huge Conan-approved sword was strapped across his back. Even his hair was bigger—a massive globe of blue-black frizz so thick that his lobster-claw horns appeared to be drowning as they tried to swim their way to the surface.

“Is that why they named you Aphros?” Leo asked as they glided down the path from the cave. “Because

of the Afro?”

Aphros scowled. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” Leo said quickly. At least he would never have trouble remembering which fish dude was which. “So what *are* you guys, exactly?”

“Ichthyocentaurs,” Aphros said, like it was a question he was tired of answering.

“Uh, icky what?”

“Fish centaurs. We are the half brothers of Chiron.”

“Oh, he’s a friend of mine!”

Aphros narrowed his eyes. “The one called Hazel told us this, but we will determine the truth. Come.”

Leo didn’t like the sound of *determine the truth*. It made him think of torture racks and red-hot pokers.

He followed the fish centaur through a massive forest of kelp. Leo could’ve darted to one side and gotten lost in the plants pretty easily, but he didn’t try. For one thing, he figured Aphros could travel much faster in the water, and the guy might be able to shut off the magic that let Leo move and breathe. Inside or outside the cave, Leo was just as much a captive.

Also, Leo had no clue where he was.

They drifted between rows of kelp as tall as apartment buildings. The green-and-yellow plants swayed weightlessly, like columns of helium balloons. High above, Leo saw a smudge of white that might have been the sun.

He guessed that meant they'd been here overnight. Was the *Argo II* all right? Had it sailed on without them, or were their friends still searching?

Leo couldn't even be sure how deep they were. Plants could grow here—so not *too* deep, right? Still, he knew he couldn't just swim for the surface. He'd heard about people who ascended too quickly and developed nitrogen bubbles in their blood. Leo wanted to avoid carbonated blood.

They drifted along for maybe half a mile. Leo was tempted to ask where Aphros was taking him, but the big sword strapped to the centaur's back sort of discouraged conversation.

Finally the kelp forest opened up. Leo gasped. They were standing (swimming, whatever) at the summit of a high underwater hill. Below them stretched an entire town of Greek-style buildings on the seafloor.

The roofs were tiled with mother-of-pearl. The gardens were filled with coral and sea anemones. Hippocampi grazed in a field of seaweed. A team of Cyclopes was placing the domed roof on a new temple, using a blue whale as a crane. And swimming through the streets, hanging out in the courtyards, practicing combat with tridents and swords in the arena were dozens of mermen and mermaids—honest-to-goodnessfish-people.

Leo had seen a lot of crazy stuff, but he had always

thought merpeople were silly fictional creatures, like Smurfs or Muppets.

There was nothing silly or cute about these merpeople, though. Even from a distance, they looked fierce and not at all human. Their eyes glowed yellow. They had sharklike teeth and leathery skin in colors ranging from coral red to ink black.

"It's a training camp," Leo realized. He looked at Aphros in awe. "You train heroes, the same way Chiron does?"

Aphros nodded, a glint of pride in his eyes. "We have trained all the famous mer-heroes! Name a mer-hero, and we have trained him or her!"

"Oh, sure," Leo said. "Like...um, the Little Mermaid?"

Aphros frowned. "Who? No! Like Triton, Glaucus, Weissmuller, and Bill!"

"Oh." Leo had no idea who any of those people were. "You trained Bill? Impressive."

"Indeed!" Aphros pounded his chest. "I trained Bill myself. A great merman."

"You teach combat, I guess."

Aphros threw up his hands in exasperation. "Why does everyone assume that?"

Leo glanced at the massive sword on the fish-guy's back. "Uh, I don't know."

"I teach music and poetry!" Aphros said. "Life

skills! Homemaking! These are important for heroes.”

“Absolutely.” Leo tried to keep a straight face. “Sewing? Cookie baking?”

“Yes. I’m glad you understand. Perhaps later, if I don’t have to kill you, I will share my brownie recipe.” Aphros gestured behind him contemptuously. “My brother Bythos—*heteaches* combat.”

Leo wasn’t sure whether he felt relieved or insulted that the combat trainer was interrogating Frank, while Leo got the home economics teacher. “So, great. This is Camp... what do you call it? Camp Fish-Blood?”

Aphros frowned. “I hope that was a joke. This is Camp _____.” He made a sound that was a series of sonar pings and hisses.

“Silly me,” Leo said. “And, you know, I could really go for some of those brownies! So what do we have to do to get to the *not killing me* stage?”

“Tell me your story,” Aphros said.

Leo hesitated, but not for long. Somehow he sensed that he should tell the truth. He started at the beginning—how Hera had been his babysitter and placed him in the flames; how his mother had died because of Gaea, who had identified Leo as a future enemy. He talked about how he had spent his childhood bouncing around in foster homes, until he and Jason and Piper had been taken to Camp Half-Blood. He explained the Prophecy of Seven, the building of the *Argo II*, and their quest to

reach Greece and defeat the giants before Gaea woke.

As he talked, Aphros drew some wicked-looking metal spikes from his belt. Leo was afraid he had said something wrong, but Aphros pulled some seaweed yarn from his pouch and started knitting. “Go on,” he urged. “Don’t stop.”

By the time Leo had explained the eidolons, the problem with the Romans, and all the troubles the *Argo II* had encountered crossing the United States and embarking from Charleston, Aphros had knitted a complete baby bonnet.

Leo waited while the fish centaur put away his supplies. Aphros’s lobster-claw horns kept swimming around in his thick hair, and Leo had to resist the urge to try to rescue them.

“Very well,” Aphros said. “I believe you.”

“As simple as that?”

“I am quite good at discerning lies. I hear none from you. Your story also fits with what Hazel Levesque told us.”

“Is she—?”

“Of course,” Aphros said. “She’s fine.” He put his fingers to his mouth and whistled, which sounded strange underwater—like a dolphin screaming. “My people will bring her here shortly. You must understand...our location is a carefully guarded secret. You and your friends showed up in a warship, pursued

by one of Keto's sea monsters. We did not know whose side you were on."

"Is the ship all right?"

"Damaged," Aphros said, "but not terribly. The skolopendra withdrew after it got a mouthful of fire. Nice touch."

"Thank you. Skolopendra? Never heard of it."

"Consider yourself lucky. They are nasty creatures. Keto must really hate you. At any rate, we rescued you and the other two from the creature's tentacles as it retreated into the deep. Your friends are still above, searching for you; but we have obscured their vision. We had to be sure you were not a threat. Otherwise, we would have had to... take measures."

Leo gulped. He was pretty sure *taking measures* did not mean baking extra brownies. And if these guys were so powerful that they could keep their camp hidden from Percy, who had all those Poseidonish water powers, they were not fish dudes to mess with. "So... we can go?"

"Soon," Aphros promised. "I must check with Bythos. When he is done talking with your friend Gank —"

"Frank."

"Frank. When they are done, we will send you back to your ship. And we may have some warnings for you."

“Warnings?”

“Ah.” Aphros pointed. Hazel emerged from the kelp forest, escorted by two vicious-looking mermaids, who were baring their fangs and hissing. Leo thought Hazel might be in danger. Then he saw she was completely at ease, grinning and talking with her escorts, and Leo realized that the mermaids were laughing.

“Leo!” Hazel paddled toward him. “Isn’t this place amazing?”

They were left alone at the ridge, which must have meant Aphros really did trust them. While the centaur and the mermaids went off to fetch Frank, Leo and Hazel floated above the hill and gazed down at the underwater camp.

Hazel told him how the mermaids had warmed up to her right away. Aphros and Bythos had been fascinated by her story, as they had never met a child of Pluto before. On top of that, they had heard many legends about the horse Arion, and they were amazed that Hazel had befriended him.

Hazel had promised to visit again with Arion. The mermaids had written their phone numbers in waterproof ink on Hazel’s arm so that she could keep in touch. Leo didn’t even want to ask how mermaids got cell-phone coverage in the middle of the Atlantic.

him.”

Her hand went to her denim jacket, like she was checking for something in the inside pocket. She always wore that jacket, or some sort of overshirt, even when it was hot outside. Leo had assumed that she did it out of modesty, or because it was better for horseback riding, like a motorcycle jacket. Now he began to wonder.

His brain shifted into high gear. He remembered what Frank had said about his weakness...a piece of firewood. He thought about why this kid would have a fear of fire, and why Hazel would be so attuned to those feelings. Leo thought about some of the stories he'd heard at Camp Half-Blood. For obvious reasons, he tended to pay attention to legends about fire. Now he remembered one he hadn't thought about in months.

“There was an old legend about a hero,” he recalled. “His lifeline was tied to a stick in a fireplace, and when that piece of wood burned up...”

Hazel's expression turned dark. Leo knew he'd struck on the truth.

“Frank has that problem,” he guessed. “And the piece of firewood...” He pointed at Hazel's jacket. “He gave it to you for safekeeping?”

“Leo, please don't...I can't talk about it.”

Leo's instincts as a mechanic kicked in. He started thinking about the properties of wood and the

clear. Leo was one of the wild cards. If he did the wrong thing, the world could fall. No... it *must* fall. Leo wondered if Frank and his firewood had something to do with that line. Leo had already made some epic mistakes. It would be so easy for him to accidentally send Frank Zhang up in flames.

“There you are!” Bythos’s voice made Leo flinch.

Bythos and Aphros floated over with Frank between them, looking pale but okay. Frank studied Hazel and Leo carefully, as if trying to read what they’d been talking about.

“You are free to go,” Bythos said. He opened his saddlebags and returned their confiscated supplies. Leo had never been so glad to fit his tool belt around his waist.

“Tell Percy Jackson not to worry,” Aphros said. “We have understood your story about the imprisoned sea creatures in Atlanta. Keto and Phorcys must be stopped. We will send a quest of mer-heroes to defeat them and free their captives. Perhaps Cyrus?”

“Or Bill,” Bythos offered.

“Yes! Bill would be perfect,” Aphros agreed. “At any rate, we are grateful that Percy brought this to our attention.”

“You should talk to him in person,” Leo suggested. “I mean, son of Poseidon, and all.”

Both fish-centaurs shook their heads solemnly.

will convince Tiberinus to help her. Hopefully.”

“Hopefully,” Leo repeated.

Bythos produced three small pink pearls from his saddlebags. “And now, off with you, demigods! Good sailing!”

He threw a pearl at each of them in turn, and three shimmering pink bubbles of energy formed around them.

They began to rise through the water. Leo just had time to think: *A hamster ball elevator?* Then he gained speed and rocketed toward the distant glow of the sun above.

exhausted, flew around the rigging like a blond Peter Pan, putting out fires from the second green explosion that had lit up the sky just above the mainmast.

As for Piper, all she could do was stare at her knife Katoptris, trying to locate Leo, Hazel, and Frank. The only images that came to her were ones she didn't want to see: three black SUVs driving north from Charleston, packed with Roman demigods, Reyna sitting at the wheel of the lead car. Giant eagles escorted them from above. Every so often, glowing purple spirits in ghostly chariots appeared out of the countryside and fell in behind them, thundering up I-95 toward New York and Camp Half-Blood.

Piper concentrated harder. She saw the nightmarish images she had seen before: the human-headed bull rising from the water, then the dark well-shaped room filling with black water as Jason, Percy, and she struggled to stay afloat.

She sheathed Katoptris, wondering how Helen of Troy had stayed sane during the Trojan War, if this blade had been her only source of news. Then she remembered that everyone around Helen had been slaughtered by the invading Greek army. Maybe she *hadn't* stayed sane.

By the time the sun rose, none of them had slept. Percy had scoured the seafloor and found nothing. The *Argo II* was no longer in danger of sinking, though

without Leo, they couldn't do full repairs. The ship was capable of sailing, but no one suggested leaving the area—not without their missing friends.

Piper and Annabeth sent a dream vision to Camp Half-Blood, warning Chiron of what had happened with the Romans at Fort Sumter. Annabeth explained her exchange of words with Reyna. Piper relayed the vision from her knife about the SUVs racing north. The kindly centaur's face seemed to age thirty years during the course of their conversation, but he assured them he would see to the defenses of the camp. Tyson, Mrs. O'Leary, and Ella had arrived safely. If necessary, Tyson could summon an army of Cyclopes to the camp's defense, and Ella and Rachel Dare were already comparing prophecies, trying to learn more about what the future held. The job of the seven demigods aboard the *Argo II*, Chiron reminded them, was to finish the quest and come back safely.

After the Iris-message, the demigods paced the deck in silence, staring at the water and hoping for a miracle.

When it finally came—three giant pink bubbles bursting at the surface off the starboard bow and ejecting Frank, Hazel, and Leo—Piper went a little crazy. She cried out with relief and dove straight into the water.

What was she thinking? She didn't take a rope or a

life vest or anything. But at the moment, she was just so happy that she paddled over to Leo and kissed him on the cheek, which kind of surprised him.

“Miss me?” Leo laughed.

Piper was suddenly furious. “Where *were* you? How are you guys alive?”

“Long story,” he said. A picnic basket bobbed to the surface next to him. “Want a brownie?”

Once they got on board and changed into dry clothes (poor Frank had to borrow a pair of too-small pants from Jason) the crew all gathered on the quarterdeck for a celebratory breakfast—except for Coach Hedge, who grumbled that the atmosphere was getting too cuddly for his tastes and went below to hammer out some dents in the hull. While Leo fussed over his helm controls, Hazel and Frank related the story of the fish-centaurs and their training camp.

“Incredible,” Jason said. “These are *really* good brownies.”

“That’s your only comment?” Piper demanded.

He looked surprised. “What? I heard the story. Fish-centaurs. Merpeople. Letter of intro to the Tiber River god. Got it. But these brownies—”

“I know,” Frank said, his mouth full. “Try them with Esther’s peach preserves.”

“That,” Hazel said, “is *incredibly* disgusting.”

“Pass me the jar, man,” Jason said.

Hazel and Piper exchanged a look of total exasperation. *Boys.*

Percy, for his part, wanted to hear every detail about the aquatic camp. He kept coming back to one point: “They didn’t want to meet me?”

“It wasn’t that,” Hazel said. “Just...undersea politics, I guess. The merpeople are territorial. The good news is they’re taking care of that aquarium in Atlanta. And they’ll help protect the *Argo II* as we cross the Atlantic.”

Percy nodded absently. “But they didn’t want to meet me?”

Annabeth swatted his arm. “Come on, Seaweed Brain! We’ve got other things to worry about.”

“She’s right,” Hazel said. “After today, Nico has less than two days. The fish-centaurs said we *have* to rescue him. He’s essential to the quest somehow.”

She looked around defensively, as if waiting for someone to argue. No one did. Piper tried to imagine what Nico di Angelo was feeling, stuck in a jar with only two pomegranate seeds left to sustain him, and no idea whether he would be rescued. It made Piper anxious to reach Rome, even though she had a horrible feeling she was sailing toward her own sort of prison—a dark room filled with water.

“Nico must have information about the Doors of Death,” Piper said. “We’ll save him, Hazel. We can

Frank scooted back like the disk might explode. He had an orange-juice mustache and a brownie-crumbe beard that made Piper want to hand him a napkin.

“What did it have on it?” Frank asked nervously. “And what *is* the Mark of Athena? I still don’t get it.”

Annabeth took the disk from Percy. She turned it in the sunlight, but it remained blank. “The map was hard to read, but it showed a spot on the Tiber River in Rome. I think that’s where my quest starts...the path I’ve got to take to follow the Mark.”

“Maybe that’s where you meet the river god Tiberinus,” Piper said. “But what *is* the Mark?”

“The coin,” Annabeth murmured.

Percy frowned. “What coin?”

Annabeth dug into her pocket and brought out a silver drachma. “I’ve been carrying this ever since I saw my mom at Grand Central. It’s an Athenian coin.”

She passed it around. While each demigod looked at it, Piper had a ridiculous memory of show-and-tell in elementary school.

“An owl,” Leo noted. “Well, that makes sense. I guess the branch is an olive branch? But what’s this inscription, AΘΕ—Area Of Effect?”

“It’s alpha, theta, epsilon,” Annabeth said. “In Greek it stands for *Of The Athenians*...or you could read it as *the children of Athena*. It’s sort of the Athenian motto.”

“Like SPQR for the Romans,” Piper guessed.

Annabeth nodded. “Anyway, the Mark of Athena is an owl, just like that one. It appears in fiery red. I’ve seen it in my dreams. Then twice at Fort Sumter.”

She described what had happened at the fort—the voice of Gaea, the spiders in the garrison, the Mark burning them away. Piper could tell it wasn’t easy for her to talk about.

Percy took Annabeth’s hand. “I should have been there for you.”

“But that’s the point,” Annabeth said. “*No one* can be there for me. When I get to Rome, I’ll have to strike out on my own. Otherwise, the Mark won’t appear. I’ll have to follow it to... to the source.”

Frank took the coin from Leo. He stared at the owl. “*The giants’ bane stands gold and pale, Won with pain from a woven jail.*” He looked up at Annabeth. “What is it... this thing at the source?”

Before Annabeth could answer, Jason spoke up.

“A statue,” he said. “A statue of Athena. At least... that’s my guess.”

Piper frowned. “You said you didn’t know.”

“I *don’t*. But the more I think about it...there’s only one artifact that could fit the legend.” He turned to Annabeth. “I’m sorry. I should have told you everything I’ve heard, much earlier. But honestly, I was scared. If this legend is true—”

Athens. They hid it in an underground shrine in Rome. The Roman demigods swore it would never see the light of day. They literally *stole* Athena, so she could no longer be the symbol of Greek military power. She became Minerva, a much tamer goddess.”

“And the children of Athena have been searching for the statue ever since,” Annabeth said. “Most don’t know about the legend, but in each generation, a few are chosen by the goddess. They’re given a coin like mine. They follow the Mark of Athena...a kind of magical trail that links them to the statue...hoping to find the resting place of the Athena Parthenos and get the statue back.”

Piper watched the two of them—Annabeth and Jason—with quiet amazement. They spoke like a team, without any hostility or blame. The two of them had never really trusted each other. Piper was close enough to both of them to know that. But now...if they could discuss such a huge problem so calmly—the ultimate source of Greek/Roman hatred—maybe there was hope for the two camps, after all.

Percy seemed to be having similar thoughts, judging from his surprised expression. “So if we—I mean *you*—find the statue...what would we do with it? Could we even *move* it?”

“I’m not sure,” Annabeth admitted. “But if we could save it somehow, it could unite the two camps. It

down there? What's guarding it? If it's got to do with spiders—?"

"Won through pain from a woven jail," Frank recalled. "Woven, like webs?"

Annabeth's face turned as white as printer paper. Piper suspected that Annabeth knew what awaited her...or at least that she had a very good idea. She was trying to hold down a wave of panic and terror.

"We'll deal with that when we get to Rome," Piper suggested, putting a little charmspeak in her voice to soothe her friend's nerves. "It's going to work out. Annabeth is going to kick some serious booty, too. You'll see."

"Yeah," Percy said. "I learned a long time ago: *Never* bet against Annabeth."

Annabeth looked at them both gratefully.

Judging from their half-eaten breakfasts, the others still felt uneasy; but Leo managed to shake them out of it. He pushed a button, and a loud blast of steam exploded from Festus's mouth, making everyone jump.

"Well!" he said. "Good pep rally, but there's still a ton of things to fix on this ship before we get to the Mediterranean. Please report to Supreme Commander Leo for your superfun list of chores!"

Piper and Jason took charge of cleaning the lower deck, which had been thrown into chaos during the monster

attack. Reorganizing sickbay and battening down the - storage area took them most of the day, but Piper didn't mind. For one thing, she got to spend time with Jason. For another, last night's explosions had given Piper a healthy respect for Greek fire. She didn't want any loose vials of that stuff rolling through the corridors in the middle of the night.

As they were fixing up the stables, Piper thought about the night Annabeth and Percy had spent down here accidentally. Piper wished that she could talk with Jason all night—just curl up on the stable floor and enjoy being with him. Why didn't *they* get to break the rules?

But Jason wasn't like that. He was hardwired to be a leader and set a good example. Breaking the rules didn't come naturally to him.

No doubt Reyna admired that about him. Piper did too... mostly.

The one time she'd convinced him to be a rebel was back at the Wilderness School, when they had sneaked onto the roof at night to watch a meteor shower. That's where they'd had their first kiss.

Unfortunately, that memory was a trick of the Mist, a magical lie implanted in her head by Hera. Piper and Jason were together *now*, in real life, but their relationship had been founded on an illusion. If Piper tried to get the *real* Jason to sneak out at night, would

he do it?

She swept the hay into piles. Jason fixed a broken door on one of the stables. The glass floor hatch glowed from the ocean below—a green expanse of light and shadow that seemed to go down forever. Piper kept glancing over, afraid she'd see a monster's face peeping in, or the water cannibals from her grandfather's old stories; but all she saw was an occasional school of herring.

As she watched Jason work, she admired how easily he did each task, whether it was fixing a door or oiling saddles. It wasn't just his strong arms and his skillful hands, though Piper liked those just fine, but the way he acted so upbeat and confident. He did what needed to be done without complaint. He kept his sense of humor, despite the fact that the guy had to be dead on his feet after not having slept the night before. Piper couldn't blame Reyna for having a crush on him. When it came to work and duty, Jason was Roman to the core.

Piper thought about her mother's tea party in Charleston. She wondered what the goddess had told Reyna a year ago, and why it had changed the way Reyna treated Jason. Had Aphrodite encouraged or discouraged her to like Jason?

Piper wasn't sure, but she wished her mom hadn't appeared in Charleston. Regular mothers were embarrassing enough. Godly glamour moms who

side. I know she is.”

“You trust her.” Piper’s voice sounded hollow, even to herself.

“Look, Pipes. I told you, you’ve got nothing to be jealous about.”

“She’s beautiful. She’s powerful. She’s so... Roman.”

Jason put down his hammer. He took her hand, which sent a tingle up her arm. Piper’s dad had once taken her to the Aquarium of the Pacific and shown her an electric eel. He told her that the eel sent out pulses that shocked and paralyzed its prey. Every time Jason looked at her or touched her hand, Piper felt like that.

“*You’re* beautiful and powerful,” he said. “And I don’t want you to be Roman. I want you to be Piper. Besides, we’re a team, you and me.”

She wanted to believe him. They’d been together, really, for months now. Still, she couldn’t get rid of her doubts, any more than Jason could get rid of the SPQR tattoo burned on his forearm.

Above them, the ship’s bell rang for dinner.

Jason smirked. “We’d better get up there. We don’t want Coach Hedge tying bells around our necks.”

Piper shuddered. Coach Hedge had threatened to do that after the Percy/Annabeth scandal, so he’d know if anyone sneaked out at night.

“Yeah,” she said regretfully, looking at the glass

doors below their feet. “I guess we need dinner... and a good night’s sleep.”

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PIPER

THE NEXT MORNING PIPER WOKE to a different ship's horn—a blast so loud it literally shook her out of bed.

She wondered if Leo was pulling another joke. Then the horn boomed again. It sounded like it was coming from several hundred yards away—from another vessel.

She rushed to get dressed. By the time she got up on deck, the others had already gathered—all hastily dressed except for Coach Hedge, who had pulled the night watch.

columns now.

“Need an answer,” Leo said urgently. “I can turn, or we can take off. The stabilizers are working again. But I need to know quick—”

“We have to keep going,” Annabeth said. “I think he’s guarding these straits. If that’s really Hercules, sailing or flying away wouldn’t do any good. He’ll want to talk to us.”

Piper resisted the urge to use charmspeak. She wanted to yell at Leo: *Fly! Get us out of here!* Unfortunately, she had a feeling that Annabeth was right. If they wanted to pass into the Mediterranean, they couldn’t avoid this meeting.

“Won’t Hercules be on our side?” she asked hopefully. “I mean... he’s one of us, right?”

Jason grunted. “He was a son of Zeus, but when he died, he became a god. You can never be sure with gods.”

Piper remembered their meeting with Bacchus in Kansas—another god who used to be a demigod. He hadn’t been exactly helpful.

“Great,” Percy said. “Seven of us against Hercules.”

“And a satyr!” Hedge added. “We can take him.”

“I’ve got a better idea,” Annabeth said. “We send ambassadors ashore. A small group—one or two at most. Try to talk with him.”

"I'll go," Jason said. "He's a son of Zeus. I'm the son of Jupiter. Maybe he'll be friendly to me."

"Or maybe he'll hate you," Percy suggested. "Half brothers don't always get along."

Jason scowled. "Thank you, Mr. Optimism."

"It's worth a shot," Annabeth said. "At least Jason and Hercules have something in common. And we need our best diplomat. Somebody who's good with words."

All eyes turned to Piper.

She tried to avoid screaming and jumping over the side. A bad premonition gnawed at her gut. But if Jason was going ashore, she wanted to be with him. Maybe this hugely powerful god would turn out to be helpful. They had to have good luck once in a while, didn't they?

"Fine," she said. "Just let me change my clothes."

Once Leo had anchored the *Argo II* between the pillars, Jason summoned the wind to carry him and Piper ashore.

The man in purple was waiting for them.

Piper had heard tons of stories about Hercules. She'd seen several cheesy movies and cartoons. Before today, if she had thought about him at all, she'd just roll her eyes and imagine some stupid hairy dude in his thirties with a barrel chest and a gross hippie beard, with a lion skin over his head and a big club, like a

caveman. She imagined he would smell bad, belch, and scratch himself a lot, and speak mostly in grunts.

She was not expecting *this*.

His feet were bare, covered in white sand. His robes made him look like a priest, though Piper couldn't remember which rank of priest wore purple. Was that cardinals? Bishops? And did the purple color mean he was the Roman version of Hercules rather than the Greek? His beard was fashionably scruffy, like Piper's dad and his actor friends wore theirs—the sort of *I just happened not to shave for two days and I still look awesome* look.

He was well built, but not too stocky. His ebony hair was close-cropped, Roman style. He had startling blue eyes like Jason's, but his skin was coppery, as if he'd spent his entire life on a tanning bed. The most surprising thing: he looked about twenty. Definitely no older. He was handsome in a rugged but not-at-all-caveman way.

He did in fact have a club, which lay in the sand next to him, but it was more like an oversized baseball bat—a five-foot-long polished cylinder of mahogany with a leather handgrip studded in bronze. Coach Hedge would have been jealous.

Jason and Piper landed at the edge of the surf. They approached slowly, careful not to make any threatening moves. Hercules watched them with no particular

emotion, as if they were some form of seabird he had never noticed before.

“Hello,” Piper said. Always a good start.

“What’s up?” Hercules said. His voice was deep but casual, very modern. He could’ve been greeting them in the high school locker room.

“Uh, not much.” Piper winced. “Well, actually, a lot. I’m Piper. This is Jason. We—”

“Where’s your lion skin?” Jason interrupted.

Piper wanted to elbow him, but Hercules looked more amused than annoyed.

“It’s ninety degrees out here,” he said. “Why would I wear my lion skin? Do you wear a fur coat to the beach?”

“I guess that makes sense.” Jason sounded disappointed. “It’s just that the pictures always show you with a lion skin.”

Hercules glared at the sky accusingly, like he wanted to have words with his father, Zeus. “Don’t believe everything you hear about me. Being famous isn’t as fun as you might think.”

“Tell me about it,” Piper sighed.

Hercules fixed those brilliant blue eyes on her. “Are you famous?”

“My dad... he’s in the movies.”

Hercules snarled. “Don’t get me started with the movies. Gods of Olympus, they never get *anything*

right. Have you seen one movie about me where I look like me?"

Piper had to admit he had a point. "I'm surprised you're so young."

"Ha! Being immortal helps. But, yes, I wasn't so old when I died. Not by modern standards. I did a lot during my years as a hero... too much, really." His eyes drifted to Jason. "Son of Zeus, eh?"

"Jupiter," Jason said.

"Not much difference," Hercules grumbled. "Dad's annoying in either form. Me? I was called Heracles. Then the Romans came along and named me Hercules. I didn't really change that much, though lately just thinking about it gives me splitting headaches..."

The left side of his face twitched. His robes shimmered, momentarily turning white, then back to purple.

"At any rate," Hercules said, "if you're Jupiter's son, you might understand. It's a lot of pressure. Enough is never enough. Eventually it can make a guy snap."

He turned to Piper. She felt like a thousand ants were crawling up her back. There was a mixture of sadness and darkness in his eyes that seemed not quite sane, and definitely not safe.

"As for you, my dear," Hercules said, "be careful. Sons of Zeus can be... well, never mind."

Piper wasn't sure what that meant. Suddenly she wanted to get as far from this god as possible, but she tried to maintain a calm, polite expression.

"So, Lord Hercules," she said, "we're on a quest. We'd like permission to pass into the Mediterranean."

Hercules shrugged. "That's why I'm here. After I died, Dad made me the doorkeeper of Olympus. I said, *Great! Palace duty! Party all the time!* What he didn't mention is that I'd be guarding the doors to the ancient lands, stuck on this island for the rest of eternity. Lots of fun."

He pointed at the pillars rising from the surf. "Stupid columns. Some people claim I created the whole Strait of Gibraltar by shoving mountains apart. Some people say the mountains *are* the pillars. What a bunch of Augean manure. The pillars are *pillars*."

"Right," Piper said. "Naturally. So... can we pass?"

The god scratched his fashionable beard. "Well, I have to give you the standard warning about how dangerous the ancient lands are. Not just any demigod can survive the Mare Nostrum. Because of that, I have to give you a quest to complete. Prove your worth, blah, blah, blah. Honestly, I don't make a big deal of it. Usually I give demigods something simple like a shopping trip, singing a funny song, that sort of thing. After all those labors I had to complete for my evil cousin Eurystheus, well... I don't want to be *that guy*,

you know?”

“Appreciate it,” Jason said.

“Hey, no problem.” Hercules sounded relaxed and easygoing, but he still made Piper nervous. That dark glint in his eyes reminded her of charcoal soaked in kerosene, ready to go up at a moment’s notice.

“So anyway,” Hercules said, “what’s your quest?”

“Giants,” Jason said. “We’re off to Greece to stop them from awakening Gaea.”

“Giants,” Hercules muttered. “I hate those guys. Back when I was a demigod hero... ah, but never mind. So which god put you up to this—Dad? Athena? Maybe Aphrodite?” He raised an eyebrow at Piper. “As pretty as you are, I’m guessing that’s your mom.”

Piper should’ve been thinking faster, but Hercules had unsettled her. Too late, she realized the conversation had become a minefield.

“Hera sent us,” Jason said. “She brought us together to—”

“Hera.” Suddenly Hercules’s expression was like the cliffs of Gibraltar—a solid, unforgiving sheet of stone.

“We hate her too,” Piper said quickly. Gods, why hadn’t it occurred to her? Hera had been Hercules’s mortal enemy. “We didn’t want to help her. She didn’t give us much choice, but—”

“But here you are,” Hercules said, all friendliness

gone. “Sorry, you two. I don’t care how worthy your quest is. I don’t do *anything* that Hera wants. Ever.”

Jason looked mystified. “But I thought you made up with her when you became a god.”

“Like I said,” Hercules grumbled, “don’t believe everything you hear. If you want to pass into the Mediterranean, I’m afraid I’ve got to give you an extra-hard quest.”

“But we’re like brothers,” Jason protested. “Hera’s messed with my life, too. I understand—”

“You understand nothing,” Hercules said coldly. “My first family: dead. My life wasted on ridiculous quests. My second wife dead, after being tricked into poisoning me and leaving me to a painful demise. And my compensation? I got to become a *minor* god. Immortal, so I can never forget my pain. Stuck here as a gatekeeper, a doorman, a...a butler for the Olympians. No, you don’t understand. The only god who understands me even a little bit is Dionysus. And at least *he* invented something useful. I have nothing to show except bad film adaptations of my life.”

Piper turned on the charmspeak. “That’s horribly sad, Lord Hercules. But please go easy on us. We’re not bad people.”

She thought she’d succeeded. Hercules hesitated. Then his jaw tightened, and he shook his head. “On the opposite side of this island, over those hills, you’ll find

a river. In the middle of that river lives the old god Achelous.”

Hercules waited, as if this information should send them running in terror.

“And... ?” Jason asked.

“*And*,” Hercules said, “I want you to break off his other horn and bring it to me.”

“He has horns,” Jason said. “Wait...his *other* horn? What—?”

“Figure it out,” the god snapped. “Here, this should help.”

He said the word *help* like it meant *hurt*. From under his robes, Hercules took a small book and tossed it to Piper. She barely caught it.

The book’s glossy cover showed a photographic montage of Greek temples and smiling monsters. The Minotaur was giving the thumbs-up. The title read: *The Hercules Guide to the Mare Nostrum*.

“Bring me that horn by sundown,” Hercules said. “Just the two of you. No contacting your friends. Your ship will remain where it is. If you succeed, you may pass into the Mediterranean.”

“And if we don’t?” Piper asked, pretty sure she didn’t want the answer.

“Well, Achelous will kill you, obviously,” Hercules said. “And I will break your ship in half with my bare hands and send your friends to an early grave.”

Jason shifted his feet. “Couldn’t we just sing a funny song?”

“I’d get going,” Hercules said coldly. “Sundown. Or your friends are dead.”